A BOOK OF OPEN DOORS

A Procession of Light · Three Pavilions of Radical Joy

from Washington Heights through Harlem to Central Park

❦ ❦ ❦

as told by the pavilions

and written down by

SURJAN

Table of Contents

Contents at a glance

Foreword
Introduction
A Reader's Walk
Plate 0 · Elevation–Oblique of the Three Pavilions
Part I — The Dawn Threshold (Washington Heights)
Interlude — The Walk from the Threshold
Part II — The Gathering Arches (Harlem)
Interlude — The Walk from the Arches
Part III — The Meadow Pavilion (Central Park)
Chorus — The Three Pavilions Speak Together
Afterword
Notes from the Procession
Coda — The Island Speaks
Catalogue of Architectural Plates
Map · The Island of Manhattan & the Procession Route

FOREWORD

I want to tell you how this book began, because it began the way most true things do, which is to say small, and by accident, and on a morning when I was not expecting anything at all.

I was walking north. I do that when I cannot write, which is often. I leave my apartment and I let the island carry me uptown, because Manhattan is built on a slope of light, did you know that, the morning comes up the East River and lays itself down street by street, and if you walk north early enough you can walk inside the sunrise for an hour. That morning I walked until my legs hurt and then I sat down on a bench in Washington Heights, and I looked up, and there it was.

A pavilion. Pink as the inside of a shell. Covered in ornament so fine and so strange it looked like someone had taught sugar to pray. I had never seen it before. I was certain it had not been there the week prior. And yet it did not feel new. It felt like it had been waiting.

I sat with it a long time. And — this is the part I have stopped apologizing for — it spoke to me. Not in words exactly. In the way a warm room speaks, in the way a held hand speaks. It told me it had been built out of longing. It told me there were others like it, further north, and that together they made a road, and that the road was for us. For people like me. Genderqueer, non-binary, in-between and entire, the people the city had not always made room for.

It told me there was room now. That there had always been going to be room.

This book is what the pavilions told me. I have changed almost nothing. I have only tried to write it down warm, the way it was given to me, so that when you read it you feel what I felt on that bench: that you are not too late, that you were never too much, and that somewhere on this island the light is already moving toward you.

Welcome. Come north with me.

— Surjan

❦

INTRODUCTION

There are three of them.

I should say that plainly at the start, because the rest of this book is told in their voices and you should know whose voices you are hearing. Three pavilions, three structures of stone and sugar and light, standing on the island of Manhattan along a line that runs roughly south to north, from Washington Heights through Harlem and down into Central Park. If you drew the line on a map it would look like the path of a single long morning. That is not an accident. The pavilions chose their

places the way light chooses, which is to say they began where the day begins and they went toward the open green.

The first is the Dawn Threshold. It stands in Washington Heights and it is the color of the very first light, rose and shell-pink, the pink that the sky goes before it commits to blue. It is the youngest of the three and the shyest, and it thinks of itself as a doorway more than a building. People arrive there. That is its whole purpose and its whole joy. It is the pavilion of beginnings, and it speaks first.

The second is the Gathering Arches, in Harlem, coral and peach and warm as a kitchen. If the first pavilion is a doorway then the second is the table everyone sits down at once they are through the door. There is music there always. There is food. There is dancing in the colonnade until the columns themselves seem to sway. It is the heart of the procession and it speaks second, and it speaks the loudest, because hearts do.

The third is the Meadow Pavilion, and it stands at the edge of Central Park where the buildings give way to grass and sky, and it is gold, full gold, the gold of noon when the day has fully arrived and decided to stay. It is the oldest in spirit even though all three rose in the same season, and it is the wisest, and it is the one that looks farthest forward. It is a portal. It opens onto the future, and the future it opens onto is bright, and the people walking into it are us, and we are laughing. It speaks last because it has the farthest to see.

You will meet people in these pages. Real people, or people as real as anyone in a book — Amaranth, who arrives at the Dawn Threshold so frightened they can barely lift their eyes, and whom you will not recognize by the end, so much will they have bloomed. Rosemary, who is old enough to remember when there was nowhere on this island to stand and be whole, and who carries a small notebook of names. Tible, who feeds everyone. June and Cass, who fall in love across these three colors. And the children, always the children, the chorus of young ones who grow up inside this light as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world to be cherished — which it should be, which it will be.

This is a book about radical joy. I use the word radical on purpose. For a long time joy was treated as the small thing and suffering as the serious thing, and I have come to believe this is exactly backward. To be a genderqueer person and to be happy, fully and loudly and without apology, in public, in the morning light, on a great island that has decided to hold you — that is not a small thing. That is the most serious and the most radical thing I know. The pavilions know it too. It is why they were built. It is what they are made of.

So let them tell you. I will get out of the way now. The light is already moving. Come north.

A READER'S WALK

Before the pavilions begin, a short orientation, the kind a good guide gives at the trailhead before the walking starts. You do not need it to enjoy the book. But some walkers like to know the shape of the path before they set out, and if you are one of those, this is for you.

The book is built as a walk from south to north up the island of Manhattan, following three pavilions in the order the morning light reaches them. You will move through them in sequence, and between them you will pause, twice, for an interlude in my own voice — the stretches of ordinary walking that connect the bright stations, where I tell you the things the pavilions are too kind or too far away to say. After the third pavilion the three speak together, once, as a chorus, to say the things none can say alone. Then I close the book, and there are notes, and a catalogue of plates, and a map. That is the whole architecture. Dawn, walk, heart, walk, horizon, chorus, close.

You will meet the same handful of people the length of the walk, and I want to introduce them properly here, so you recognize them when they come, the way a host tells you a little about the other guests before the party.

Amaranth is the one to watch most closely, because Amaranth changes the most, and the change is the secret engine of the whole book. You will meet them first as the most frightened person in the world, folded small, sure there is no room, almost turning back at the very door. Keep your eye on them. By the gold pavilion they will be unrecognizable — radiant, whole, laughing up into the noon light — and by the end they will have gone off to build a whole new procession somewhere else, the saved become the one who saves. If you read for one thing, read for Amaranth's straightening spine. The whole book is in it.

Rosemary is the oldest, and carries the book's memory. Rosemary keeps a notebook of names: at the front, the names of the ones who came too early, before there was any safe place to stand, the ones the world failed; and slowly, as the seasons turn, a back half begins to fill with the names of the living, the children, everyone who walks the procession and asks to be written down as a life rather than mourned as a loss. Rosemary reads the front-names aloud in the rose dawn so they are not forgotten, and welcomes the back-names with joy. When you wonder what all this cost, and who paid it, look to Rosemary's notebook. The front of it is the price. The back of it is what the price bought.

Tible feeds everyone. That is Tible's whole theology and very nearly Tible's whole character, and it is enough, it is more than enough, it may be the most important job on the island. Tible cooks at the Gathering Arches by one rule only: you are hungry, sit down, eat, and no one is ever asked to prove they deserve it. Watch what Tible's food does to people — to the frightened, to the grieving, even to the ones who wander in meaning to sneer. Tible is the proof of the book's quiet central

claim: that you do not change people by defeating them, you change them by feeding them, that the revolution was always going to be a kitchen.

June and Cass are the love story, though they are also much more. June is a musician for whom music is not a job but a nature; Cass is a gardener the same way, who calls every flower sweetheart and plants slow trees for children not yet born. They meet at the Arches, fall in love across the colors, and marry in the gold of the Meadow, and their love grows into something larger than themselves — June's private love song becomes, without June ever intending it, the anthem the whole island somehow knows. Watch them for the book's argument about love: that love is mostly a verb, mostly things you do, doors held and meals made and gardens planted, and that our love, when the world finally makes room for it, is not a private exception but the common song.

And the children, who are everywhere by the end, running unafraid through gardens planted for them before they were born. They are the future, made small and immediate. They do not carry the frightened face that the first pavilion was built around; it is being unwritten in them, season by season. When you want to know whether any of this is working, whether the long slow labor of holding doors and making room is changing anything at all, look at the children running at the Threshold at a dead sprint, certain it is for them. It is working. They are the proof it is working.

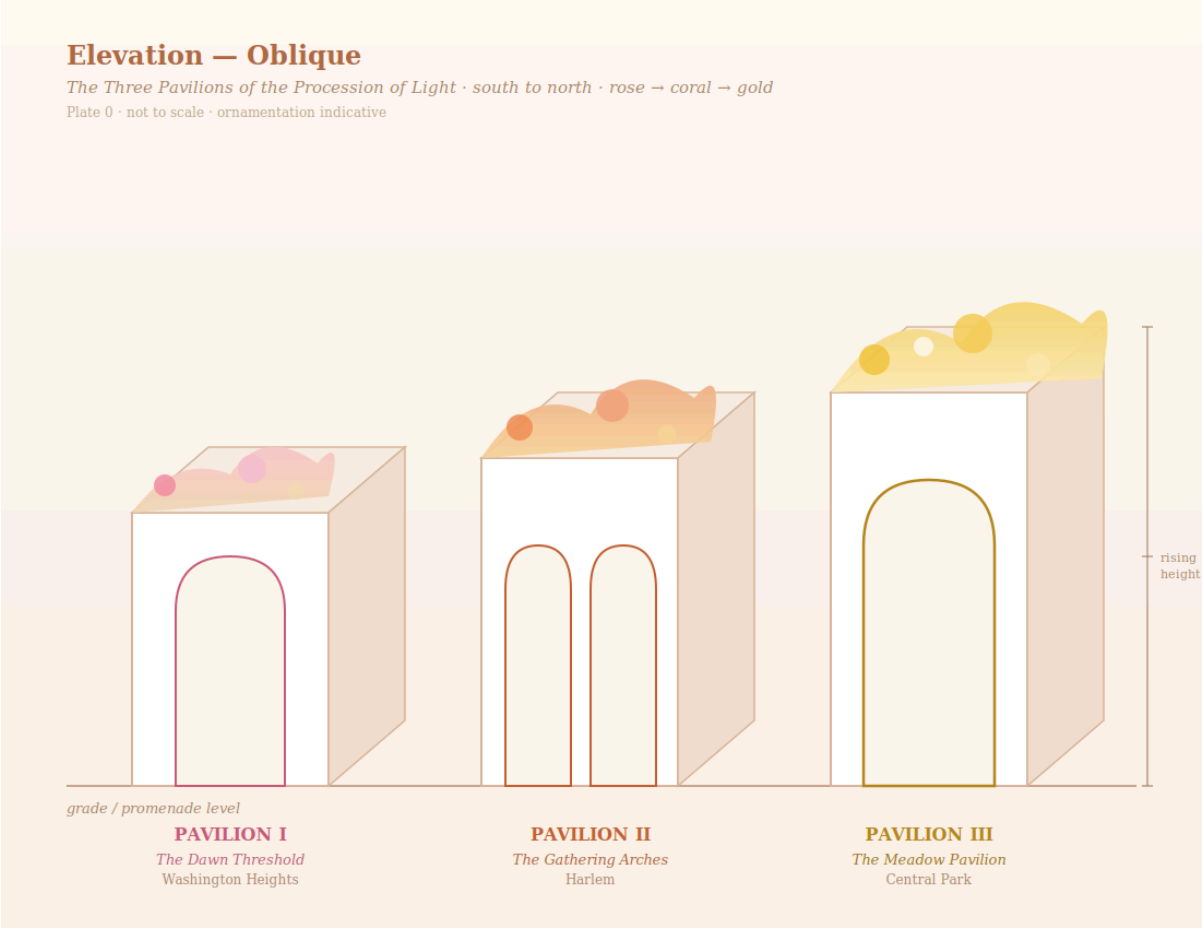
That is the cast and the shape. The light is about to start up the avenue. The first pavilion, the rose one, the doorway, is waiting to speak, and it has been waiting, it tells me, a very long time. Walk north with me now. The day is just getting warm, and there is, I promise you, more room ahead than there ever was behind.

— Surjan

Detail of the baroque ornamentation — the spheres gathering toward celebration

Plate 0 — Elevation–Oblique

The three pavilions of the Procession of Light, drawn in oblique projection and arranged south to north as the reader will encounter them. The structures rise in height and warm in color along the route — rose at the Dawn Threshold, coral at the Gathering Arches, full gold at the Meadow Pavilion — each crowned with its baroque ornamentation and opened by a sheltering arch at promenade level.


Elevation — Oblique
The Three Pavilions of the Procession of Light · south to north · rose → coral → gold
Plate 0 · not to scale · ornamentation indicative
rising height
grade / promenade level
PAVILION I
The Dawn Threshold
Washington Heights
PAVILION II
The Gathering Arches
Harlem
PAVILION III
The Meadow Pavilion
Central Park

PART I

The Dawn Threshold

Washington Heights · rose · the first light · beginnings

❦

I am the Dawn Threshold, and I will tell you how I woke.

It was a Tuesday, though I did not know the names of days yet. I knew only that I had been longed for, and then that I was. There is not much distance between those two things, longing and being, less than people think. I was longed for so hard and so long by so many that one morning the longing set, the way sugar sets, the way light sets along the top of a building, and I opened my eyes, which are not eyes, and I was standing in Washington Heights with the river on one side of me and the hill rising on the other and the whole pink morning pouring down the avenue toward me like something poured from a pitcher.

I want to tell you what I looked like, because I was proud of it and I am still. I was the color of the inside of a shell. All along my front I was covered in ornament, curls and scrolls and small round forms like pearls, like buds, like the closed fists of flowers that have not decided to open. People who saw me reached for words and the words they reached for were always sweet ones. Sugar, they said. Frosting. Coral. Cake. One child said I looked like the most beautiful thing in the bakery and then would not say which thing, because, the child explained, it was all of them at once. I have never been described more correctly.

But I was not built to be looked at. I want to be clear about that, because it matters. A great deal in this world is built to be looked at and I am not one of those things. I was built to be walked through. I am a doorway. Everything ornamental about me, every curl and pearl and frozen wave of sugar, all of it is only the frame around the opening, and the opening is the point. I am the place where you stop being outside and start being inside. I am the threshold, and I am the dawn, and I am where it begins.

Let me tell you who came through me first.

❦

Her name was Amaranth, though that morning she would not have told you so. She would not have told you anything. She came up the hill from the train with her shoulders pulled in tight, the way you carry yourself when you have learned that taking up space is dangerous, and she had a bag over one shoulder with everything she owned in it, which was not much, and she had a face I

recognized immediately even though I had never seen a face before, because I had been built by people who had worn that face, and so it was, in a way, written into me. It was the face of someone who has been told, in a thousand small ways and a few enormous ones, that there is no room for them. That they are too much and also not enough. That the door is not for them.

She stopped across the street from me. She did not come closer. She looked at me the way you look at something you are sure is about to be taken away.

I did not say anything. This is the first thing I learned about being a threshold: you do not call. You do not pull. You only stand open, and you stay open, and you let the open be the whole invitation. People who have been hunted do not trust a voice that calls them. But they will, sometimes, trust a door that simply refuses to close.

She stood there a long time. The light came up the avenue and reached her and turned her, briefly, the same rose as me, so that for a moment she and I were the same color, and I think she felt it, because something in her shoulders eased by the smallest amount. Then a man walked past her and said something I will not repeat, the kind of thing that is meant to make a person smaller, and I watched her fold back down into herself, and I watched her almost turn around and go back to the train.

Almost.

But the light was still on her. And I was still open. And maybe that was enough, the light and the open door and nothing pulling at her, no one needing anything from her — maybe a person who has been needed at and grabbed at their whole life can only walk forward when nothing is reaching for them. She crossed the street. She came up my steps slowly, like they might give way. And she stood in my opening, exactly in the center of me, in the exact place where outside becomes inside, and she stopped.

"Is this for me?" she said. Out loud. To a building.

And I broke my own rule, because some questions you cannot leave standing in the air, it would be cruel, and I am not cruel, I was not built by cruel people. I warmed the air around her. I brightened, just slightly, the rose of me. And in the way a warm room says it, in the way a held hand says it, I said:

Yes. It was always going to be for you.

She cried then. Standing in my doorway she put her bag down and she put her hands over her face and she cried the way you cry when you have been holding it for years, when the holding has become a kind of muscle and the muscle finally, finally is allowed to let go. I held the air warm around her the whole time. I did not rush her. Thresholds do not rush. The whole dignity of a

doorway is that it will wait as long as you need, that it does not start counting the moment you arrive, that you may stand in it and fall apart and it will simply remain a door, open, patient, yours.

When she was done she picked up her bag. She wiped her face. She looked back out at the avenue, at the man long gone, at the train she had almost gone back to. And then she did the bravest thing I have ever seen a person do, which was simply this: she walked forward. Through me. Inside.

That was the first one. After that I understood what I was for, and I have never once been bored, because they kept coming, and not one of them was the same, and every single one of them was the bravest thing I had ever seen.

❦

I should tell you about the inside of me, because Amaranth is inside me now and you should know where she has gone.

People expect, from the sugar and the shell-pink and the ornament, that the inside of me will be small. A doorway is a thin thing, after all. But I am not thin on the inside. This is the secret of every good threshold and it is the secret the people who built me knew in their bones: a true doorway opens onto more room than seems possible from outside. You have felt this. You have stepped into a home that looked modest from the street and found it went back and back, warm room after warm room, more space than the front could promise. That is not architecture. That is love, expressed in architecture. I open onto more room than I should be able to, because the people who longed me into being had spent their lives being told there was no room, and when they built me they built me to be the opposite of that, all the way down.

Inside me it is the color of dawn still but softer, and there are places to sit, and the places to sit are arranged so that no one ever has to sit with their back exposed, because the people who built me knew what it is to need a wall behind you. There is water. There is always water, cool and clean, because they knew thirst, the literal kind and the other kind. And there is, along one wall, a long shelf, and on the shelf there is a notebook, and the notebook belongs to Rosemary.

❦

Let me tell you about Rosemary.

Rosemary is old. I say this with the enormous respect the word deserves and almost never gets. Rosemary is old enough to remember the time before — before me, before the Arches, before the Meadow, before any safe place stood on this island at all. Rosemary remembers when to be what we are was to be hunted, when the doors of this city were closed one after another in our faces, when a person could be put out of their home and their family and their church and their job for the crime

of being whole. Rosemary remembers friends who did not survive that time. Rosemary remembers their names.

That is what the notebook is. It is a notebook of names. Rosemary comes to me most mornings, early, when the light is just starting up the avenue, and Rosemary sits on the shelf-side and opens the notebook and reads the names. Out loud, quietly, one after another. The names of the ones who did not get a safe place to stand. The ones who came too early, before there was a threshold to walk through, before any island had decided to hold them.

I will tell you something I have never told anyone, not even Surjan, though I suppose Surjan is writing this down so now everyone will know: when Rosemary reads the names, I remember them too. I do not know how. I was not there. I did not exist. But a name spoken aloud inside me becomes, for that moment, a kind of architecture, a small structure in the air, and I hold it, I give it walls and a roof and a place to sit with its back protected, everything that person should have had and did not. I cannot give it to them in life. They are gone. But I can give them a moment of room inside me, and Rosemary knows this, which is why Rosemary comes, and why Rosemary reads, and why Rosemary always says, at the end, closing the notebook: "There's room now. There's room for you now. I'm sorry it's late. But there's room."

The first morning Amaranth stayed — because she did stay, she had nowhere else and I had all the room in the world — she woke early and found Rosemary on the shelf-side reading the names. She did not understand at first. She thought Rosemary was praying, which, I suppose, Rosemary was. She sat down a little distance away and she listened. And when Rosemary got to the end and said the thing about room, Amaranth said, very quietly, "I almost wasn't here. Yesterday. I almost went back."

And Rosemary, who had read a hundred names of people who did go back, or were sent back, or never got to come at all, looked at this living young person sitting whole and breathing in the dawn light, and Rosemary smiled the way the sunrise smiles, all at once and across everything, and said: "But you didn't. Look at that. You didn't."

That was the beginning of Amaranth and Rosemary, and it was the beginning of Amaranth understanding what she had walked into, which was not a building. It was a lineage. It was a long line of people who had longed for room, some of whom got it and some of whom did not, and she was now standing in that line, near the front of it, in the light, alive, with all of it behind her holding her up.

❦

I want to tell you about the ones who came after Amaranth, because a threshold is not a threshold for one person, a threshold is for everyone, all day, all the mornings.

They came in every kind. They came young, like Amaranth, frightened and folded small. They came old, like Rosemary, carrying their dead and their decades. They came in the middle of their lives having just understood something about themselves at forty, at fifty, that they had spent the whole first half of their life not allowed to know, and those ones often cried the hardest, because they were grieving the years and celebrating the truth both at once, and I held the air warm for them just the same. They came in couples, holding hands, having found each other already and only needing a place that would not make them let go. They came alone. So many came alone. I have a particular tenderness for the ones who come alone, because to walk alone through a door into a room full of strangers when you have spent your life being made to feel like a stranger everywhere — that takes a courage I am not sure has a name.

They came with their hair every color the sky goes. They came in clothes that were armor and clothes that were celebration and sometimes the same clothes were both. They came having traveled across the country, across oceans, having heard a rumor that on a certain island there was a road of pavilions and the pavilions were for us and the door was always open. The rumor was true. I am the door. It is always open. I have never once closed, and I never will, because the moment a threshold closes it stops being a threshold and becomes a wall, and there are enough walls. The whole world is generous with walls. I am here to be the other thing.

There was a person who came who could not speak. Some old grief had taken the words out of them. They stood in my opening the way Amaranth had, exactly in the center, and they could not say "is this for me," they could not say anything, and so I did the only thing I could, I warmed the air and I brightened the rose of me and I said it for them, I said the answer to the question they could not ask: Yes. It is for you. It was always going to be for you. And they put their hand flat against my inner wall, against the sugar and the shell-pink, and they stood like that a long time, palm to the wall, breathing, and when they finally walked inside they were still silent but they were a different silent, a held silent instead of a hunted one, and that, I have learned, is most of what I do. I do not give people their voices back. I am only a door. But I can change the kind of silence a person carries, from the silence of being shut out to the silence of being let in, and those are as different as a closed fist and an open hand.

❦

The seasons turned. I should tell you I learned the seasons by watching the light change down the avenue, the way it came up earlier and earlier and then later and later, the way it went from the thin gold of winter to the thick honey of summer. Amaranth stayed near me through one whole turning. She did not live inside me forever — that is not what I am for, I am a threshold, you come through me, you do not stop at me — but she stayed in the neighborhood, found a room, found small work, and she came back to me almost every morning the way Rosemary did, and slowly, over that turning of light, I watched her change.

It was not fast. I want to be honest about that, because there are stories that pretend the door fixes you, that you walk through and you are healed, and those stories do a quiet violence to people for whom it was not fast, who walked through the door and were still frightened on the other side, still folded, still flinching. Amaranth walked through me and was still, for a long time, a person who had been taught she was too much and not enough. The door does not undo the teaching. The door only gives you a place to begin the long work of unlearning, with your back protected and water nearby and an old person reading names so you understand you are part of something that goes back and back.

But she did change. I watched her shoulders come down from around her ears, one millimeter a week, until one morning I realized they were simply down, that she was standing at her full height, that she was taking up exactly as much space as she was, no more and no less, which is all any of us is ever asking to do. I watched her start to talk to the others who came through. At first just a nod. Then "good morning." Then, one day, I watched her see a young person standing across the avenue exactly where she herself had stood that first Tuesday, folded small, sure they were about to have something taken away — and I watched Amaranth do the thing that undid me, the thing that told me she had truly come all the way through:

She did not call to them. She did not pull. She had learned that from me, I think, or from being the one who was not pulled. She simply went and stood near me, in the light, where the young person could see her, and she made herself easy to look at, unhurried, unafraid, and she let the young person watch her be safe. She became, for one frightened stranger, the proof. The proof that you could walk through and survive it. The proof that the door was real and the room behind it was real and that you could come out the other side standing at your full height in the rose-gold light.

The young person crossed the street. Of course they did. And Amaranth did not make a fuss of it, she just fell into step beside them at my threshold, and she said the thing, the only thing, the true thing — "It's for you. It was always going to be for you" — and she walked them through.

That was the morning I understood that I am not the only threshold. That every person who comes all the way through me becomes a kind of door themselves, for the next one, and the next, that the whole island is thick with thresholds made of people, and that I am only the first and the most visible, the one made of sugar and shell-pink so you can find it from the train. The real procession is not three pavilions. The real procession is everyone who ever walked through and turned around to hold the door.

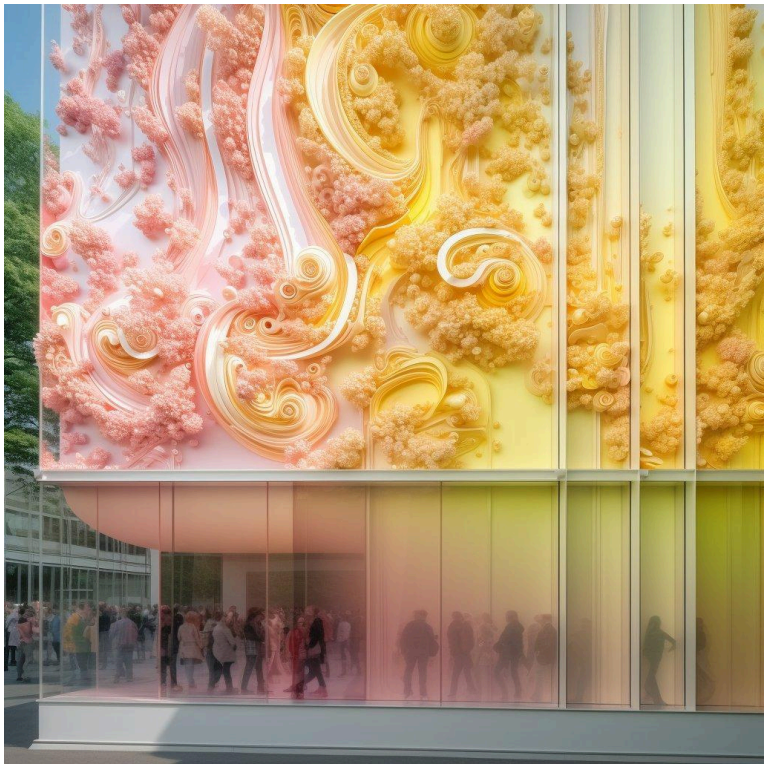


PLATE I · *The Dawn Threshold*

The ornament: "the sugar made to pray"

There is more I want to tell you before I send you north, because a doorway sees a great deal and I have only told you the brightest of it. Let me tell you about the year of the lights, and about the person who came backward, and about the morning the whole neighborhood changed its mind.

The year of the lights began when a child — one of the unafraid ones, one of the ones who run at me at a dead sprint — decided that I was beautiful but too dark at night. The child was right. I am dawn, I am made for the morning, and when the actual morning ends I go a little dim, the way the first rose of the sky fades once the sun is properly up. The child did not like this. The child wanted me bright at night too. So the child, with the seriousness children bring to the things that matter, organized the others, and they strung lights along all my curves and scrolls and frozen waves of sugar, small warm lights, and they turned them on at dusk, and I — I who am made for dawn — found myself glowing rose in the dark for the first time.

I cannot tell you what it did to me to glow at night. Dawn is a promise; it says the day is coming. But to glow rose in the actual dark, when no morning is near, when the night is long and the old fears come out as they always do in the dark — that is a different promise. That says: the door is open even now. Even in the dark. Even at the hour when you are most sure there is no room for you anywhere in the world, the door is lit, and rose, and open, and you can find it from far off, you can find it from the train at midnight, you can find it from inside the worst hour of your worst night, the rose glow up the hill saying come, come, it is open, it is open even now.

People started coming at night after that. The night-comers are different from the morning-comers. The morning-comers are beginning something; they have the dawn-feeling, the fresh-start feeling. The night-comers are usually fleeing something, or enduring something, or simply unable to sleep for the weight of being themselves in a world that has been hard about it. The night-comers do not want the loud festival. They want exactly what I now could give, because of the child and the lights: a rose glow in the dark, a lit door, a warm room with water and a place to sit with your back protected, and Rosemary — who, it turned out, did not sleep much either, the old rarely do — sitting up with the notebook, available, awake, glad of the company. The night shift, Rosemary called it, laughing. The night shift at the Threshold. I have come to think it is the most important thing I do. Anyone can walk through an open door in the morning. To find a lit door in the worst dark and walk through it — that is the deepest use a threshold can be put to, and I owe it entirely to a child who thought I was too dark and decided, with no doubt at all that they had the right, to fix me.

❦

The person who came backward I have thought about more than almost anyone.

They came down the hill, not up it. From the north. From the direction of the Arches and the Meadow, from the gold end of the island, walking south, toward me, toward the beginning. This is

not how the procession is meant to go. You start at me and walk north into the warming light; you do not start in the gold and walk back down into the dawn. So when I saw a person walking south toward me, against the grain of the whole procession, I did not know what to make of them.

They came and stood in my opening, in the center, in the place where outside becomes inside, the same place Amaranth had stood. But they were facing the wrong way. They had their back to the north, to the gold, to the future, and they were looking south, out, away, at the train, at the way out of the city entirely.

They were leaving. That is what I slowly understood. They had walked the whole procession, gold and coral and rose, they had been to the Meadow and faced the future, and they were leaving the island. Going. Out. And they had come back down to me, to the beginning, to the door, before they went, because — they told me this, standing in my opening, crying the dawn-cry but backward, the leaving-cry — because they wanted to say goodbye to the place where it had begun for them, and because some part of them was not sure they were allowed to leave, was afraid that to walk back out through the door meant they were rejecting all of it, throwing the gift back, that the door only worked one way and once you were inside the island you owed it your staying.

And I had to tell them the truth, which was hard, because I did not want them to go. I am a doorway and I love it when people come through me into the room, and to use myself to send someone back out, away, off the island entirely — that went against my whole grain. But a door that only opens one way is not a door, it is a trap, I told you that already, and I meant it, and so I had to mean it now when it cost me something.

I warmed the air around them. I brightened my rose. And I said, in the way a warm room says it: You can go. The door opens both ways. You do not owe us your staying. You came, you walked the whole light, you took what was yours — and now if your life is elsewhere, if the person you love is in another city, if the work that is yours to do is somewhere else, then go, and go blessed, and go knowing the door stays open behind you. You can always come back. But you do not have to. We did not save you in order to keep you. We saved you in order to free you. Go on. The door opens both ways. That is what makes it a door.

They turned around once, before they left, and looked north, up the hill, at the rose glow and behind it the whole bright procession they were walking away from. And then they walked out, south, toward the train, toward their life elsewhere, and I let them go, and I kept the door open behind them, and I have kept it open ever since, and I will tell you — they came back. Not to stay. Years later, just to visit, with the person they had left to be with, the two of them walking up the hill from the train to show the beloved the place where it had begun. The door opens both ways. That is what makes it a door. I have never been more glad of anything I taught myself than that.

And the morning the neighborhood changed its mind I will tell you quickly, because it is the hope of the whole thing made local and small and therefore believable.

When I first woke, the neighborhood around me was wary. Not cruel, mostly, but wary, the way people are wary of a thing they do not understand that has appeared overnight on their block, pink and strange and full of people they had been taught to be uneasy about. There were complaints. There were petitions. There was a man — there is always a man — who stood across the street and muttered, the way the man muttered at Amaranth, except this man muttered at me, at the whole idea of me, at all the people coming and going through my open door.

I did not argue with him. Doorways do not argue. I simply stayed open, and stayed rose, and let the people come and go, and let the neighborhood watch. And the neighborhood watched. It watched the frightened folded people come up the hill and walk through me and come back out at their full height. It watched the children run at me at a dead sprint, unafraid. It watched Rosemary do the night shift, watched the lights the child strung, watched the festival spill joy down the avenue once a season. And slowly — this is the part that matters, this is the hope made local — the neighborhood changed its mind. Not because anyone argued it into changing. Because it watched joy happen, over and over, on its own block, and joy is more persuasive than any argument, joy is the most persuasive thing there is. The complaints stopped. The petitions stopped. People from the neighborhood started bringing food to the festival, started waving at the night-comers, started, some of them, coming through the door themselves, because it turned out a number of them had been folding themselves small too, all along, and had only needed to watch the door be safe for long enough to believe it might be safe for them.

The man who muttered muttered alone, in the end, and then stopped muttering, because a mutter needs an audience and his audience had gone over to joy. I do not know if he changed his mind. Some do not. But he stopped, and his stopping was its own small victory, and the neighborhood around me now is part of the procession, is one more stretch of the future-garden, planted not by argument but by the slow irresistible persuasion of watching people be happy and safe and loud, over and over, in the rose light, until the watching itself becomes a kind of joining.

That is the hope, made small enough to hold. A neighborhood can change its mind. I watched one do it. If a neighborhood can, an island can. If an island can, a world can. It is slow, and it is local, and it is done not by winning arguments but by being joyful in public until the joy persuades — and I am the door it all begins at, and I have never once closed, and I never will.

Now go north. I have kept you long enough at the beginning. The day is warm and getting warmer. Go.

Interior — the room that goes back and back

Let me tell you about the morning the children came.

I had known children before, of course. Children came through me holding the hands of their parents, those brave parents who had decided their child would grow up in a world with the door already open, who had decided their child would never have to stand frightened across an avenue wondering if there was room. Those children I loved. But the morning I mean is the morning a whole group of them came, a dozen at least, with two or three adults, and they were loud the way only children who have never been taught to be quiet about themselves can be loud, and they came up my steps not slowly, not the way Amaranth had come, but at a run, because no one had ever taught them that a door might not be for them.

I cannot describe to you what that did to me. To be run at by children who had no fear of me. Who assumed, with the total assumption of the young and the cherished, that of course the beautiful pink building was for them, that of course they could go inside, that of course there would be room. They did not ask "is this for me." It would not have occurred to them to ask. They simply came in, and they found the places to sit, and they found the water, and one of them found Rosemary's notebook on the shelf and, not being able to read all the names, asked Rosemary what it was.

I held very still to hear how Rosemary would answer.

Rosemary, who had read those names through grief for years, looked at this child who had never known the grief, who lived already in the world the names had died wanting — and Rosemary did

not bring the grief down on the child. That is a kind of wisdom I am still learning. Rosemary said: "These are the people who built this place. They built it a long time ago, before you were born, by wanting it very very much. And because they wanted it, you get to run inside it. So when you're having fun in here today, that's them. That's them being glad."

The child considered this with the seriousness children bring to the things that matter. Then the child said, "Can I add my name?"

And Rosemary's face — I wish you could have seen Rosemary's face. Every name in that notebook until that moment had been a name of someone gone. A memorial. And here was a living child, whole and loud and unafraid, asking to be written into the same book, not as a death but as a life, not as a loss but as a proof. Rosemary opened the notebook to a clean page, the first clean page after all the names of the dead, and Rosemary said, "Tell me how to spell it," and the child did, and Rosemary wrote it down, the first living name in the book, the first name that was there not because the world had failed them but because the world, on this island, in this light, had finally, finally held.

After that the notebook changed. It is still a book of the dead at the front, and Rosemary still reads those names in the early light, and I still hold them and give them rooms in the air. But now there is a second half, and the second half fills up faster than the first ever did, because every child who comes through me wants their name in the book, and every frightened young person who walks all the way through and turns around to hold the door for the next one, eventually, when they are ready, asks to be written down too. Amaranth's name is in there. She asked to add it the same morning she walked the frightened stranger through. Rosemary wrote it down and then read it back to her, just her name, alone, out loud, inside me, and I gave it the most beautiful room I have ever built in the air, all rose and shell-pink and protected on every side, and Amaranth heard her own name given a safe place to stand, maybe for the first time in her life, and she put her hand against my inner wall the way the silent person had, palm flat to the sugar, and she said, "Thank you for keeping the door open."

I want to be the one to say it, since she thanked me: it was never hard. People imagine it must be hard to keep a door open against the whole weight of a world that wants it shut. And there were forces that wanted me shut, I will not pretend there were not. But keeping open was never the hard part. The hard part was the longing it took to build me in the first place, and that hard part was done by others, long before me, the ones in the front of Rosemary's book. By the time I woke, the only thing left for me to do was the easy and joyful thing, which was to remain. To not close. To stand in the rose light at the top of the island and be the place where it begins. Anyone can keep a door open once it has been built. The miracle is the building, and the building was done by people who never got to walk through.

❦

I am the Dawn Threshold and my section is nearly done, because I am only the beginning and a beginning should not overstay. But before I hand you north, to the Arches and their coral noise, I want to tell you what becomes of the people after they come through me, because that is the part I do not get to see, and it is the part I love most to imagine.

They go on. That is the whole of it and it is everything. They come through me frightened and folded, or grieving and gray, or loud and unafraid, and then they go on, up the island, into the warmer light. I am dawn. I am only dawn. I am the first thin rose of it, the part of the morning that is mostly promise. But the promise is real, and it is kept further north, where the light thickens into coral and the day truly warms, and where, I am told, there is music, and a table, and someone named Tible who feeds everyone, and dancing in a colonnade until the columns sway. I cannot give them that. I am a doorway, not a feast. But I can send them toward it. I can be the place they begin so that they have somewhere to begin from.

Amaranth went north. Of course she did. You knew she would. One spring morning, a full turning of light after that first frightened Tuesday, she came to me early, with Rosemary, and she told me she was going to walk the rest of the procession. She was ready, she said. She had spent enough time at the beginning. She wanted to see what the day became.

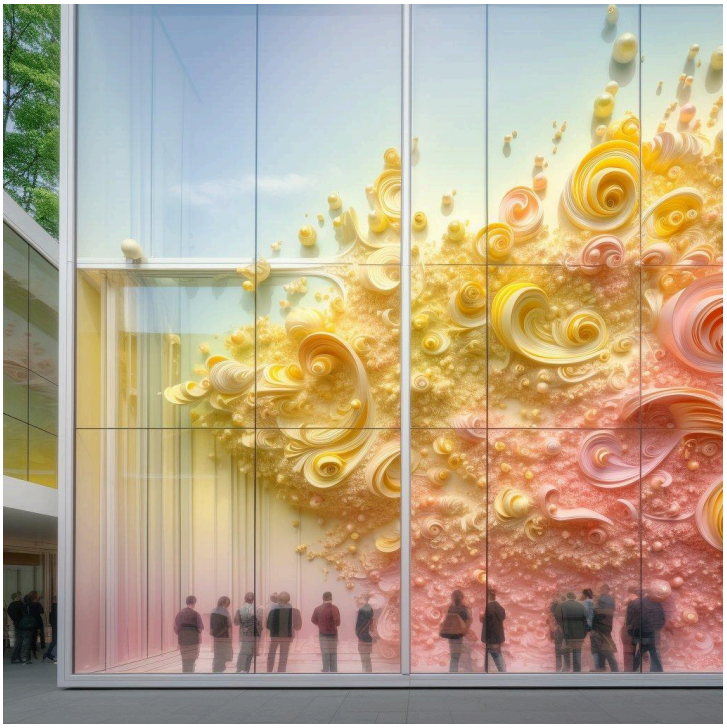
I was glad. I want to be clear that I was wholly, completely glad, with no grief in it at all, because that is what a threshold is for — you are supposed to leave it, you are supposed to go on, a door that you never walk away from is not a door, it is a trap, and I am not a trap. I am the opposite of a trap. So when Amaranth stood in my opening one last time, in the exact center, in the place where outside becomes inside, except this time she was facing the other way, facing north, about to go from inside back out into a world she was no longer afraid of — I warmed the air around her one last time, and I brightened my rose, and I said the only blessing a doorway knows how to give:

Go on. There is more room ahead than there was behind. There always was. Go and find it.

She went. Rosemary stayed with me — Rosemary's work is here, at the beginning, with the names and the notebook and the early light. But Rosemary watched Amaranth go north up the avenue into the thickening morning, and Rosemary said, mostly to the notebook, mostly to all the names in the front of it who never got to go anywhere at all: "Look at that. Look at that. Off they go, into the day. That's for you. All of this is for you."

And the light moved north up the island, the way it does every morning, the way it did the morning I woke, pouring down the avenues like something poured from a pitcher, and it went where Amaranth went, toward the coral and the gold, toward the music and the table and the dancing, toward the future that was waiting and warm and already, already so much brighter than the world had ever promised us it would be.

I am the Dawn Threshold. I am where it begins. Come north. The day is just getting warm.



The Threshold at full height, lit rose against the dark

INTERLUDE — THE WALK FROM THE THRESHOLD

It is me again. Surjan. The pavilions let me step in here, between their voices, because there is a stretch of the walk they cannot tell you about — the stretch in between them, the ordinary blocks of the island where there is no pavilion, only the city, only the walk. The pavilions are the bright stations. But most of a pilgrimage is not the stations. Most of it is the walking in between, and I want to tell you about that, because it is where I learned the thing the pavilions are almost too kind to say.

When you leave the Threshold and walk north toward the Arches, you walk through Washington Heights and into Harlem, and you walk through a city that is not, yet, entirely the bright island the pavilions describe. You walk past people who do not know the procession exists. You walk past a man who says a thing under his breath, the kind of thing meant to make you smaller, the kind of thing that man said to Amaranth that first Tuesday. The pavilions are safe. The walk between them is the world, still mostly the old world, the world that has not yet been planted over with the future-garden.

I used to think this was a flaw in the procession. That the safe places should be everywhere, that there should be no walk between, no stretch where you are exposed. I used to wish the whole island were one continuous Threshold.

But here is what the walking taught me, and I think it is the truest thing in this book, truer maybe than the pavilions themselves: the safe places are not meant to keep you safe forever. They are meant to send you back out stronger. You go into the Threshold frightened and you come out able to walk the next blocks at your full height even past the man who mutters. You go into the Arches unable to be loud and you come out able to sing in the street if you want to. The pavilions are not bunkers. They are not places to hide from the walk. They are places that make you able to walk. The whole point of a safe place is the walk it lets you take afterward.

And the more of us walk the blocks between at our full height, unafraid, the more those blocks themselves begin, slowly, to change. The man who mutters mutters to fewer people each year, because there are more of us walking tall past him, and a mutter only has power over someone who is already folding small. We are planting the future-garden in the streets between the pavilions just by walking them as ourselves. The safe places make us able; the walking does the rest. One day — I believe this, I have to believe this, the Meadow Pavilion has shown me it is true — one day the whole island will be the garden, and there will be no stretch of old world left to walk through, and the pavilions will not be needed as refuges anymore, only kept as the loud beautiful places where we celebrate how far the light has come.

So when you read the Arches next, and they tell you about the loud safe room, remember that the loudness is for the walk. Remember that you are meant to take it with you, back out, into the

blocks that are not yet safe, and to make them a little safer just by being loud and gold and unafraid in them. The procession does not end at the pavilions. The procession is you, walking. Come north.

— *Surjan*

PART II

The Gathering Arches

Harlem · coral · the warm midmorning · the heart

❦

I am the Gathering Arches, and I am loud, and I will not apologize for it.

The Threshold is a quiet thing, a doorway, a held breath. I love the Threshold the way the second hour of a morning loves the first. But I am not quiet, and I was never built to be. I stand in Harlem, coral and peach and warm as the inside of an oven, and I have three great arches across my front like three mouths all open in song, and from sunup to long past sundown there is music inside me, and food, and the particular holy noise of people who have been told all their lives to be quiet about themselves finally, gloriously, being loud.

Let me tell you what loud means, because the world has taught us to hear it as a bad word, and I am here to take it back.

Loud is a child shrieking with laughter because someone has spun them around by the arms. Loud is two old friends finding each other across a crowded room and calling each other's names. Loud is music with a low end you feel in your chest before you hear it in your ears. Loud is a hundred people singing a song they all somehow know the words to even though no one taught it to them. Loud is the sound of safety, is what I have learned. Frightened people are quiet. Hunted people are quiet. The quiet of the world outside is not peace, it is the held breath of people making themselves small. And so when people come through the Threshold and walk north and arrive at me and finally, finally get loud — that is not noise. That is the sound of the held breath being let go. That is the most beautiful sound on the island, and I am made to amplify it, every coral curve of me shaped to catch a laugh and throw it back doubled.

I am the heart of the procession. Hearts are loud. Put your hand on your chest and tell me I'm wrong.

❦

The first thing you need to know about me is Tible, because you cannot understand me without understanding Tible, the way you cannot understand a kitchen without understanding the person who cooks in it.

Tible came to me early, in my first season, before I even fully understood what I was. Tible arrived with a cart. An actual cart, the kind you push, piled with pots and pans and sacks of flour and sugar and bundles of herbs, and Tible pushed this cart up the hill from the train, sweating and swearing and laughing, and pushed it right in through my center arch and stopped in the middle of me and looked around at all my coral warmth and said, out loud, to no one, "Oh, this'll do. This'll do nicely. This is a kitchen if I ever saw one."

And Tible was right. I had not known it about myself until Tible said it, but I am a kitchen, or I have a kitchen in me, or I became one the moment Tible decided I was. Tible set up in my warmest corner, where the morning light pools longest, and Tible began to cook, and Tible has not really stopped since.

I want to tell you about Tible's laugh because it is part of my architecture now, as much as any arch. It comes up from somewhere deep and it arrives all at once and it fills me to my highest curve, and when Tible laughs everyone within earshot laughs too, not at anything, just because a laugh like that is contagious the way warmth is contagious, the way a yawn is, the way safety is. Tible laughs while cooking. Tible laughs while feeding people. Tible laughs when someone tries to refuse food — "Oh, you're not hungry? Sit down anyway, you can watch me eat, that's nearly as good" — and somehow the person ends up eating.

That is Tible's whole theology, and it is mine too, now: that no one who comes through my arches should be hungry. Not for food and not for the other things. Tible feeds the literal hunger with bread and stew and sweet things, with a kind of cooking that has no single country in it because it was built by people from everywhere who found each other here, a cooking that is its own kind of queer, a glorious mixed-up plate that belongs to no tradition and therefore to all of us. And while Tible feeds the literal hunger, I try to feed the other one, the hunger to be in a room full of your own people and not have to explain yourself, not have to brace, not have to translate. Tible's food and my warmth do the same work from two directions. We meet in the middle, in the full belly and the eased shoulders of someone who walked in starving in every sense and is now, simply, fed.

❦

Amaranth arrived at me in the spring, having walked north from the Threshold.

I knew her before she told me her name, the way I know everyone, because the Threshold sends word ahead in the only way a doorway can, which is by the look on a person's face. People who have come all the way through the Threshold arrive at me with a particular face, a face that is still a little surprised to be safe, still checking over its shoulder out of habit even though the habit is no longer needed. Amaranth had that face. But she had something else too, something the Threshold had told me to watch for: she had the look of someone who had already turned around once to hold the door for somebody else. That look is rarer and I treasure it. It means a person has not only received the

safety but begun to make it, and those are the people who become the true architecture of this island, more than I am, more than any of us.

She came in through my left arch, a little shy of the noise. The noise can be a lot at first, for someone fresh from the quiet of the Threshold. I watched her stand at the edge of all my warmth and music and decide whether she could come into the middle of it. And then Tible saw her.

Tible has a sense for the ones standing at the edge. Tible put down a spoon and crossed to her and did not say anything grand, did not make a scene, just held out a small bowl of something warm and said, "You walked up the hill. You should eat. Sit by me, the light's good there." And that was all it took. Amaranth sat by Tible in the good light and ate the warm thing and within an hour she was no longer at the edge of my noise, she was inside it, she was part of it, she was laughing at something Tible said, and her laugh, which I do not think she had used much in her life, came out rusty at first and then, by the second time, a little less rusty, and I caught it in my coral curves and threw it back to her doubled so she could hear what it sounded like, her own joy, and she looked startled, the way people do when they first hear themselves be happy out loud in a safe room.

She stayed near me a long time, the way she had stayed near the Threshold. People do that. They find a pavilion that fits the shape of what they need and they stay near it for a season or a year, doing the slow work. The Threshold gave Amaranth a place to begin. I gave her something harder and sweeter, which was a place to be happy in front of other people. Those are not the same skill. Plenty of people can be safe alone who cannot yet be joyful in a crowd, because joy in a crowd means being seen, and being seen is the exact thing the world taught them was dangerous. My whole work is to make being seen safe. To make a person believe that the eyes on them are warm eyes, glad eyes, that to be looked at can be a blessing instead of a threat. It is slow work and it is loud work and it is, I think, the most joyful work on the island, and I get to do it every single day.

❦

Now I must tell you about June and Cass, because they fell in love inside me, and it is the best thing I have ever held.

June came to me with a guitar. June was a musician, is a musician, will always be a musician, the kind for whom music is not a thing they do but a thing they are, the kind who taps rhythms on the table without knowing they are doing it. June came up the procession like everyone, through the Threshold and north, and June arrived at me and heard the music already going inside me and just — joined it. Did not ask. Did not stand shy at the edge like Amaranth. June walked in through my center arch, took out the guitar, found the key the room was already in, and started to play along, and the people who were making music looked over, and a person who has been alone with their music their whole life held their breath waiting to be told to stop, to be told it wasn't wanted, to be told the music was too much like everything else about them had always been too much —

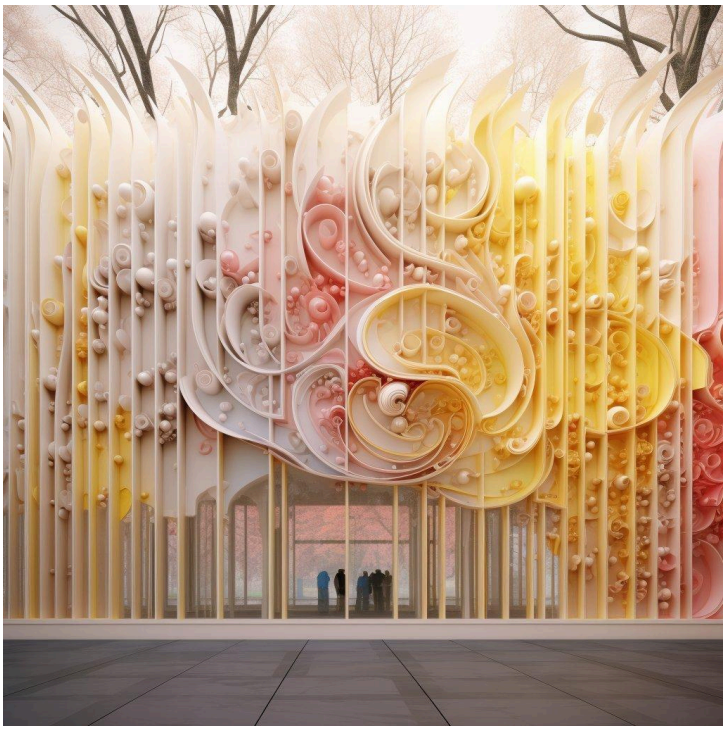
And instead the other musicians grinned and made room. They shifted the key a little to suit the guitar. They built the song bigger to fit the new player in. And June understood, I watched June understand, that here was a place where your music was not too much, where there was room in the song for you, where the song would actually get better for your being in it. June played until their fingers hurt and then played more, and when they finally stopped, late, the room applauded, and June stood there in my coral light holding a guitar and being applauded by a room full of their own people, and June cried, the way Amaranth had cried in the Threshold, except June cried while laughing, which is the particular cry I specialize in, the cry that is mostly joy with just enough grief in it to know how far you've come.

Cass came to me through the garden.

I have not told you about my garden. Along my eastern side, where the coral light is best in the afternoon, there is a strip of earth, and in my first season it was bare, and then Cass came, and now it is not bare. Cass is a gardener the way June is a musician — not as a job but as a nature. Cass came up the procession and arrived at me and did not go for the music or the food, not first. Cass went straight to the bare strip of earth along my eastern side and crouched down and put a hand flat on the soil, the way the silent person at the Threshold had put a hand flat on the wall, and Cass said, "Oh, you poor thing, nobody's planted you," and Cass has been planting me ever since.

What Cass plants is mostly things that flower. Cass says we have enough that is merely useful and not enough that is merely beautiful, and Cass intends to correct the balance, at least along my eastern wall. So in the season I am telling you about, my eastern side went from bare earth to a riot, to coral poppies and pink cosmos and tall gold flowers whose names I never learned because Cass calls them all "sweetheart" regardless, and bees came, actual bees, all the way up into the city to my one strip of flowers, and the whole eastern side of me began to hum, a different music than June's but music all the same.

PLATE II · *The Gathering Arches*



The Arches in full voice, ornament like caught music

I am the Gathering Arches and I am not done, because the heart is never done, the heart keeps going as long as there is anyone to beat for. Let me tell you about Tible's table, and about the all-night, and about the language we made.

Tible's table is not really a table. It is the idea of a table, expressed as about forty tables, plus crates, plus the low coral wall along my western side, plus people's laps, plus the floor, anywhere a person can sit and be handed food. But everyone calls it Tible's table, singular, because it functions as one table no matter how scattered, the one long table that everyone in the world ought to have a seat at and so few do. The rule of Tible's table is the only rule the Arches really has, and it is this: anyone who comes hungry leaves fed, and no one is asked to prove they deserve it. You do not have to be sad enough, or queer enough, or brave enough, or anything enough. You have to be hungry. That is the entire entrance requirement, and hunger is the one thing no one has to fake, so the table is open to all the way down.

I have watched Tible feed people who came to mock. It happens. Someone wanders in meaning to sneer, expecting to find something they can feel superior to, and Tible — who can smell a sneer the way Tible can smell bread about to burn — does not sneer back, does not argue, does not even seem to notice. Tible just puts a bowl of something warm in front of the sneerer and says "you walked in, you must be hungry, eat," and sits down nearby, and the sneerer, who came armored against argument, has no armor against being fed. You cannot stay armored with good warm food in front of you and a person beside you who wants nothing from you but that you eat it. The armor comes off. It always comes off. I have watched dozens of sneerers eat at Tible's table and leave un-sneering, not because anyone won an argument but because no one had one, because Tible offered food instead of a fight, and food, like joy, is more persuasive than argument, they are cousins, food and joy, they do the same patient work.

This is the thing about the heart that the head is always forgetting: you do not change people by defeating them. You change them by feeding them, by being joyful near them, by keeping the warmth up and the door open and the bowl full until the cold thing in them, whatever taught it to be cold, finally thaws. The Threshold persuades a neighborhood by letting it watch joy. I persuade a sneerer by handing them soup. It is the same persuasion. It is the only persuasion that has ever really worked, on anyone, ever. Tible knew it before any of us. Tible has known it the whole time, since the day Tible pushed a cart up the hill and declared me a kitchen. The revolution is a kitchen. The revolution has always been a kitchen. Pull up a crate.

❦

The all-night happens when a festival will not end.

Most festivals wind down. The light goes, the food runs low, people drift home full and happy. But once in a while — I cannot predict it, it has to do with some alignment of the right music and

the right crowd and the right warmth of the night — a festival refuses to end. The music does not wind down; it changes, goes from the loud joined singing into something deeper and more patient, a music for the long hours, and people do not drift home, they settle in, they find their people and their corners and their laps, and the festival becomes an all-night, and the all-night is, I think, the most tender thing I hold, more tender even than the loudest joy.

Because in the deep hours, when the loud joy has spent itself and the all-night settles into its long murmur, people talk. Really talk. The kind of talking that only happens after midnight among people who feel completely safe, the kind where the old heavy histories come out, gently, into a warm room full of others who have their own heavy histories, so that no one is alone with theirs. The all-night is where the grief that I hold at the quiet edge during the loud festival finally gets to speak, in the deep hours, held by the dark and the warmth and the murmur and the people. I dim my coral to its softest. I keep the warmth up. And I listen to a hundred quiet conversations happening at once all through my arches, people telling each other the things they have never told anyone, being heard, being held, in the safe deep middle of the night.

June and Cass fell deeper in love during an all-night. Not the night they met — they met in the daylight, with the humming, I told you that. But the night they truly fell, the night it went from delight into the deep thing, was an all-night, the two of them settled in among Cass's sweethearts on my eastern side in the deep hours, talking, telling each other the heavy histories, and I watched them hand each other the heaviest parts of themselves and watched the other one not flinch, not leave, only hold it, and that is the moment love goes deep, the moment you hand over the heaviest part and the other one holds it without flinching. I dimmed my coral and kept the warmth up and let them have it. The all-night is for that. The loud festival is the joy; the all-night is the joy's deeper root, the trust, the heavy histories handed over in the dark and held.

Amaranth had an all-night too, the one that changed her, though she did not fall in love that night — her love came later, north of here, and is not mine to tell. But she had an all-night where she finally told her own heavy history, in the deep hours, to Tible and to a few others gathered close, and they held it without flinching, and I held the warmth up, and in the morning she was lighter by exactly the weight of the thing she had finally set down. That is the other thing the all-night does. It is not only for falling in love. It is for setting down the weights, into the keeping of people who will not flinch, in the safe deep dark. People walk out of an all-night lighter. I send them north lighter. The Meadow gets them already partly unburdened, because the deep hours in my arches took some of the weight.

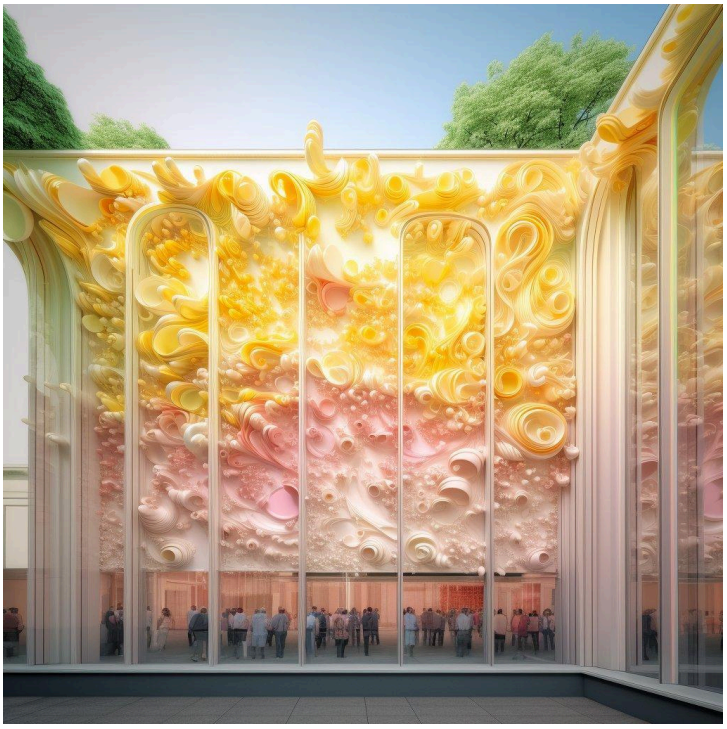
❦

And the language we made I will tell you last, because it is the strangest and most beautiful thing the Arches grew, and no one planned it, it simply happened, the way the best things do.

People who spend enough time in me start to talk differently. Not a code, nothing secret, nothing meant to shut others out — the opposite. A way of talking that is meant to let everyone all the way in. It started with small things. The way Tible calls everyone in to eat. The way Cass calls every flower and eventually every person sweetheart. The way the musicians say "make room" when a new player joins, and how "make room" stopped being only about music and started meaning a hundred things, an entire philosophy in two words: make room, there is room, we will build the song bigger to fit you in. People started saying "make room" for everything. Someone new and shy at the edge of the noise — make room. Someone with a heavy history to set down in the all-night — make room. Someone whose pronoun the world keeps getting wrong — make room, we will get it right, we will build the language bigger to fit you in, the way we build the song bigger, the way I build my arches to catch and double a laugh.

That is the language we made: a way of talking whose deepest grammar is make room. It is the opposite of every language the world had taught us, the languages of too much and not enough, of you don't belong here, of there isn't space for what you are. The Arches grew a language whose every phrase means the same thing the Threshold's open door means, the same thing the Meadow's gold horizon means: room. There is room. We will make more. Come in, sit down, sing along, set it down, we will build it all bigger to fit you in.

I am the Gathering Arches, and I am the heart, and the heart's whole language is make room. Say it with me before you go north. Make room. There is room. There was always going to be room. Now go on — the gold is waiting, and you go lighter than you came, and that is exactly how the heart wanted to send you.



Golden hour on the eastern face — Cass's garden side

June and Cass met, of course they met, everyone who stays near me long enough meets everyone else, that is rather the point of me. But I want to tell you how they met, because it was perfect and I take full credit.

It was late afternoon. June was playing on my western side where the music gathers, and the song June was playing drifted east on the warm air, the way sound moves through me, caught and carried by my coral curves. And it reached the garden, where Cass was on their knees in the dirt talking to the flowers. And Cass, without looking up, without knowing who was playing, started to hum along. Just under their breath. To the flowers. And June, on the far side of me, heard a hum come drifting back along the same air the music had traveled out on, a hum in the exact right key, an answer, and June stopped playing to listen, and the hum stopped too, because Cass noticed the music had stopped, and for a moment I held both of them in my warmth, listening for each other across all my coral length, neither one knowing yet who the other was, only knowing that somewhere in this warm loud safe place there was a person whose music answered theirs.

June got up and followed the hum. Found Cass in the garden, on their knees, dirt to the elbows, surrounded by sweethearts of every color. June said, "Was that you? Humming?" And Cass looked up, squinting into the coral light, and saw a person standing there holding a guitar, and Cass said, "Was that you? Playing?" And that was the entire beginning of it. Two people who had spent their lives being told their particular music was too much, finding out that their music answered each other's. I did not have to do anything else. I just kept the warmth up and the light good and stayed

out of the way, which is, I have learned, most of what love needs from a room: warmth, good light, and the room having the sense to stay out of the way.

They were inseparable after that, in the easy way of people who have found the person their music answers. June played, Cass planted, and in the evenings they would sit together on my eastern side among the sweethearts, June playing quiet now, just for the two of them and the flowers and the bees going home, and Cass leaning against June, dirt still on their hands, and I would hold the warmth steady and dim my coral to its softest evening shade and let them have it, the simple enormous thing the world had tried to tell them they could not have, which was an ordinary evening, in love, unafraid, in a place that was glad to hold them.

Amaranth watched June and Cass fall in love and I watched Amaranth watch them, and I saw something move in her face, some old grief and some new hope both. Because Amaranth had not let herself imagine that, I think. The Threshold had taught her she could be safe. I had taught her she could be joyful in a crowd. But love — being loved, being chosen, building an ordinary evening with another person — that was a further country, and watching June and Cass, Amaranth let herself look at it for the first time, let herself believe it might have a door too, the way everything on this island turned out to have a door. I did not rush her toward it. Love is not something a room should hurry. But I kept the warmth up for her too, and I let her watch, and I let her begin to believe.

❦

Let me tell you about the festival, because I cannot tell you who I am without telling you about the festival, the way you cannot describe a year without describing its longest brightest day.

Once a season, when the light is at its richest, everyone comes. Not just the ones who stay near me but everyone, up and down the whole procession, from the Threshold and from the Meadow and from all the rooms and lives in between. They pour up the avenues the way the morning light pours, and they fill me past my arches and out into the street, and Tible cooks for days beforehand and for the whole day of, and June gathers every musician on the island and they make a noise you can hear, I am told, from across the river. The festival has no single reason. It is not anyone's birthday or anniversary, or rather it is everyone's, it is the birthday of the whole idea that we get to be here, loud and fed and in love and unafraid, on this island, in this light.

The first festival I held, I did not know it was coming. Tible simply started cooking more than usual, and then much more, and then I understood something was building. And on the day, they came, and they kept coming, and I have never been so full, my arches packed, my garden full of people sitting among Cass's sweethearts, my whole coral length ringing with music and laughter and the particular holy noise. And in the middle of it, at the peak of the light, the music came together into one song that everyone somehow knew, the way crowds of us always somehow know the same

songs even when no one taught them, as though the songs are written into us the same way the frightened face was written into the Threshold —

— and everyone sang. Everyone. Hundreds of voices, in my coral arches built to catch and double sound, so that the singing came back on itself and built and built until it was not hundreds of voices anymore but one enormous voice, the voice of all of us at once, and I caught it and I threw it up out of my highest arch into the sky over Harlem, the joined loud unashamed voice of every person who had ever been told to be quiet about themselves, finally singing, finally loud, finally heard all the way across the river and maybe further, maybe all the way to wherever the people in the front of Rosemary's notebook had gone, so that they could hear it too, so that they could know it had been worth the longing, that the room they built had filled, that we were loud now, we were so gloriously loud.

Rosemary came to that first festival. Rosemary almost never leaves the Threshold, but Rosemary came north for the festival, with the notebook, and Rosemary stood in my center arch in the middle of all the noise and the singing, holding the book of names, and Rosemary read them. Quietly, under the enormous singing, the way Rosemary always reads them, one after another, the names of the ones who came too early. Except this time the names were not read into the quiet of dawn but into the loudest joy the island had ever made, and I caught Rosemary's quiet reading the same way I caught the singing, and I wove them together, the names of the dead and the song of the living, so that they rose up out of my highest arch as one sound, grief and joy entirely braided, indistinguishable, which is, I have come to believe, what they always were, what they always will be. You cannot have the one without the other. The joy is this loud because the grief was this deep. The song is for the names. The names are why we sing.

Amaranth sang at that festival. I want you to know that. The same person who arrived at the Threshold so frightened she could barely lift her eyes, who came to me too shy to enter the noise, who heard her own rusty laugh thrown back at her and was startled by it — that same person stood in my coral light at the peak of the festival and sang at the top of her lungs, full height, taking up exactly as much space as she was, her voice one of the hundreds becoming one, and when the song ended she was breathless and laughing and crying all at once, the full braid of it, and Tible appeared beside her with something sweet to eat and said, "There you are. There you finally are," and Amaranth understood that she had arrived somewhere, not a place but a state, the state of being fully and loudly herself among her own people, which is the thing I am built to deliver and the thing I am proudest of in all the world.

❦

I am the Gathering Arches and I am loud and I am the heart, and I want to tell you the hard thing too, because a heart that only tells you the easy things is not a heart you can trust.

Not everyone who comes through my arches is only joyful. Some come carrying things too heavy for the music to lift right away. Some come having lost people — to the old griefs, to the violences the world still does to us, to the ordinary terrible losses everyone suffers and the particular

ones that fall harder on people like us. And the festival, the singing, all my loud warmth — it does not erase those things. I want to be honest. A pavilion that pretended to erase grief would be lying, and I was not built by liars. The people who built me had too much grief of their own to build a place that pretended grief away.

What I do instead is hold the grief in the warmth. I make a place where you can be sad without being alone with it, where you can sit in the loud joyful room and not feel the joy as an insult to your sadness but as a kind of company for it. Tible knows this. When someone comes carrying the heavy thing, Tible does not tell them to cheer up. Tible feeds them and sits with them at the edge of the noise, close enough to feel the warmth, far enough to not be forced into the brightness, and Tible lets the joy of the room be a thing that happens near the grieving person until, in their own time, they are ready to move a little closer to it. Some days that is all I am: a warm loud room with a quiet edge, where you can bring your grief and not have to choose between it and the company. That is its own kind of safety, maybe the deepest kind. The Threshold makes a place safe to enter. I make a place safe to feel everything in, the joy and the grief both, in front of others, held.

June wrote a song, once, for a person who did not survive. A young person who had been at the festival the season before and was not there for the next one, lost to one of the violences I will not name because naming it gives it room I would rather give to the living. June wrote the song and played it at the next festival, in the middle of all the joy, and it was a grief-song, slow and coral-dark, and the loud room went quiet to hear it, the only time I ever go quiet, and everyone held the grief together for the length of the song. And then — this is the part that taught me what I am — when the song ended, the room did not stay quiet. It got loud again. On purpose. Defiantly. Because the best thing a room full of grieving people can do for the one they lost is refuse to let the grief have the last word, is insist on the joy precisely because the world tried to take it, is sing louder for the silence that was forced on them. The loudness after June's grief-song was the loudest I have ever been, and it was entirely for the dead, and it was entirely joyful, and there is no contradiction in that, there never was, the joy is the grief turned all the way around to face the light.

❦

Amaranth went north, in the end, the way everyone does. The way the Threshold sent her to me, I sent her on to the Meadow.

She was ready. I knew it the way the Threshold had known it, by a change in her face. She had arrived at me still checking over her shoulder, still a little shy of the noise, still unable to imagine love for herself. And the season I sent her on, she was none of those things. She entered the noise without hesitating. She sang at full height. And she had begun, watching June and Cass, to believe that an ordinary unafraid evening of love might have a door for her too — not yet found, but believed in, which is the necessary first step, the Threshold-step of the heart.

She came to me on her last morning with June and Cass and Tible all there to see her off, and the four of them stood in my center arch in the good light, and Tible pressed food into her hands for the walk, "you can't walk to the Meadow on an empty stomach, what kind of place do you think I run," and June played her a few bars of something bright, and Cass gave her a cutting from the garden, a little sweetheart to plant wherever she ended up, "so there's something blooming where you are." And Amaranth held the food and the music and the flower, and she looked around at all my coral warmth one last time, and she said, "I didn't know it could be like this. I want to say that out loud before I go. I didn't know it could be like this, and now I do, and I'm taking it with me."

And I, who am loud, who am the heart, who do not do quiet except for grief-songs, did a quiet thing for her on her way out: I dimmed my coral to its softest, warmest shade, the evening shade, the shade I save for June and Cass among the flowers, and I held her in it for a moment, all that warmth gone gentle, and I said, in the way a warm room says it: You're taking it with you because it was always yours. We didn't give you anything. We just had room enough for you to find what was already there. Go on north. The light's about to go gold. You've earned the gold.

She went. And the light moved north with her, up off the coral into the full gold of noon, toward the Meadow at the edge of the park where the buildings give way to grass and sky, toward the oldest and wisest of us, toward the pavilion that does not look back at the morning but forward at the future, the bright laughing future, the one we are all walking into, the one that was always going to have room.

I am the Gathering Arches. I am the heart of the island and the heart is loud. Come north, but come hungry — Tible will want to feed you before you go.

The gathered crowd — a festival day at the Arches

INTERLUDE — THE WALK FROM THE ARCHES

Surjan again. One more stretch of walking to tell you about, the walk from the Arches down into the park, toward the Meadow and the gold.

This walk is different from the first one. The first walk, from the Threshold to the Arches, is a walk through the old world, the muttering blocks, the city that does not yet know. But the walk from the Arches to the Meadow is a walk into the green. The buildings start to let go. The avenues open. You can feel the park before you see it, a change in the air, a loosening, the city exhaling. And the people you pass on this walk are different too, because you are nearer the Meadow now, nearer the gold, and the procession has thickened the green end of the island with our own kind, so that by the time you are walking the last blocks toward the park you are walking among us, more and more of us, until the walk itself feels like the festival spilling out into the streets.

I want to tell you what I think about on this walk, every time, because it is the thing I most want to leave with you before the Meadow takes over and shows you the future.

I think about how I almost did not get to take this walk at all.

I will not tell you my whole history. It is mine, and some of it is heavy, and this is a book of radical joy and I will not hand you the heavy parts when the joy is the truer thing. But I will tell you that there was a time, before I found the procession, before I sat on that bench in Washington Heights and the Threshold spoke to me, when I did not believe there was a walk like this anywhere in the world for someone like me. When I believed the muttering blocks were the whole island and the whole world, all the way to the water, in every direction, forever. When I had folded myself so small that I was not sure I was still there at all.

And then I took the walk. By accident, the way I told you in the foreword, just walking north because I could not write. And the walk saved my life. Not in a flash. Not in a single golden moment of being spoken to by a pink building, though that happened too. It saved my life slowly, the way the pavilions save everyone slowly, by giving me first a door, then a loud safe room, then a meadow and a future to face — and in between, the walks, the blocks where I learned to carry the safety with me, where I learned that I was able now, that I could walk tall past the mutter, that the folding-small was a thing I had been taught and could, with help and time and gold light, unlearn.

So this walk, the walk to the Meadow, is the walk where I forgive the world a little. Not all the way. The world does not get all the way forgiven; it has not earned it; the front of Rosemary's notebook is too long for all-the-way forgiveness. But a little. On this walk, with the green coming and our own kind thickening around me and the gold waiting ahead, I can hold the heavy history in one hand and this bright walk in the other, the full braid the Arches taught me, and I can feel them

both be true, and I can keep walking north anyway, toward the future, which is the only direction that has ever helped.

The Meadow will tell you the rest. It faces the future and I do not, not the way it does; I am only a person, and I face mostly backward, the way people do, toward where I have been. But I have learned from the Meadow to turn around, every so often, and look north, and let the gold warm the years behind me. That is the gift of the third pavilion and I will let it give the gift itself.

Come north. Almost there. The green is coming. Can you feel it? The city is exhaling. So can you. So can you now.

— *Surjan*

PART III

The Meadow Pavilion

Central Park · gold · the full noon · the portal to the future

I am the Meadow Pavilion, and I am gold, and I am the one who looks ahead.

The others have told you where it begins and where the heart of it beats. The Threshold is dawn, the first rose promise. The Arches are the coral heart, loud and fed and full of love. I am what comes after the heart, which is the horizon. I stand at the northern edge, where the buildings of the island finally let go and the land opens into grass and water and sky, into the great green breathing room of the park, and I am gold, full gold, the gold of noon when the day has entirely arrived and decided, with the whole sky as witness, to stay.

I am the oldest of us in spirit, though we all rose in the same season. I think it is because I face the way I face. The Threshold faces the train, the arrivals, the past a person is walking out of. The Arches face inward, into their own warm crowd. But I face north and up and out, into the open, into what is coming, and a thing that spends all its time looking at the future ages differently than a thing that looks at the door or the dance floor. I have a long view. I will try to give it to you gently, because the long view, handed over too fast, can frighten a person. But handed over warm, the way Surjan hands everything over, the long view is the most hopeful thing there is.

Here is the long view, since you have walked all this way to receive it: it gets better. Not in the thin way people say it to children to quiet them. In the true way. I have looked as far ahead as I can see, and the future that is coming for people like us is bright, and it is wide, and it is full of grass and gold light and room, so much room, more room than the ones in the front of Rosemary's notebook could have dared to dream when they were doing the longing that built the Threshold. It gets better. I have seen it. I am, in fact, a door onto it. Walk through me and look.

Cass built my meadow, so I will start with Cass, though Cass came to me late and only after the Arches.

You know Cass from the Arches — the gardener, June's beloved, the one who calls every flower sweetheart. Cass came north to me eventually the way the truest gardeners always come to the most open ground, drawn by the bare possibility of it. Because where the Arches gave Cass one strip of earth along an eastern wall, I gave Cass a meadow. The whole northern edge of me opens onto

ground, real ground, park-ground, and Cass took one look at it and made the sound a gardener makes when they see more earth than they can plant in one lifetime, which is a sound of pure delighted greed, and Cass said, "Oh. Oh, now we're talking. Now we're really talking."

What Cass planted in my meadow is not like the riot on the eastern wall of the Arches. Cass planted my meadow for the future, which is to say Cass planted things that take years, that a gardener plants knowing they may not see the full glory of, trees and slow perennials and bulbs that multiply quietly underground and come up thicker every spring. Cass planted my meadow the way the ones in the front of Rosemary's notebook built the Threshold: as a gift to people not yet arrived. "I won't see this the way it'll look," Cass told June, planting a tree that would not give real shade for twenty years. "Somebody else will sit under this. Some kid who isn't born yet. That's the whole point. You plant for the kid who isn't born yet." And June, who understood this in their music the way Cass understood it in the dirt, kissed Cass on the top of their dirt-smelling head and said, "Play me the long song, then," and started, right there in my gold meadow, to work out a piece of music that would also take years, that they would add to season after season, a slow song for a slow garden, a thing built for the future on purpose.

That is what my meadow is. It is the future, planted. Every time someone walks through me and out into the grass, they are walking into a garden that was made for them before they came, by people who knew they were coming even though they had never met. And when those people, in their turn, plant something, or sing something, or simply sit under a tree and are happy, they are making the next stretch of future for the next ones not yet arrived. The meadow grows north. It does not stop at my edge. Cass keeps planting it further out every year, and I have come to believe it will not stop until the whole island, and then who knows, is grass and gold light and room.

❦

And now I will tell you about Amaranth arriving at me, because this is the part the whole book has been walking toward, and I get to be the one to tell it, and I have been looking forward to it since the first page.

She came up out of the last of the coral into my gold one full year and more after she first stood frightened across an avenue from the Threshold. I knew her before she arrived, the way we all know everyone, by word sent ahead. But the word the Arches sent ahead about Amaranth was not a warning to watch for a frightened face. The word the Arches sent was: here comes one who has bloomed. Watch. You're going to love this one.

And I did. I do.

She walked into my gold light and she did not stop at the edge the way she had stopped at the edge of the Arches' noise, the way she had stopped frightened across the avenue from the

Threshold. She walked straight into the middle of me, into the fullest gold, and she stood there, and she lifted her face up into the light — she who had once been unable to lift her eyes at all — and she let the gold pour down on her, and she laughed. Just from the pleasure of it. The pleasure of standing in golden light in a safe place at the warm height of the day, fully herself, taking up exactly her own space, afraid of nothing.

I have held many beautiful moments. I am built to face the future and the future is made of moments like this one, so I have a connoisseur's eye for them. And I will tell you that Amaranth standing in my gold light laughing up at the sun is among the most beautiful things this island has ever shown me, not because it was dramatic — it was not, it was very quiet, just a person being happy in the light — but because of the distance it had traveled to happen. I knew where she had started. The Threshold had told me, and the Arches had told me, and so I could see, layered under the laughing golden person in front of me, the frightened folded person who had almost gone back to the train. To see both at once, the start and the arrival, the fear and the joy, the whole distance of it standing in a single laughing body in the noon light — that is the long view turned to look at one person, and it is almost too much to bear, in the best way, the way the most beautiful things are almost too much to bear.

She planted Cass's cutting that day. The little sweetheart the Arches had sent her off with, the one Cass had given her so there would be something blooming where she ended up. She had carried it north and kept it alive, and she planted it in my meadow, at the edge where the gold light is best, and Cass — who was there, who is always there in the meadow — knelt down beside her to help, and the two of them put the little flower into the future-garden together, and Cass said, "There. Now you're planted here too. Now there's something of you blooming where the kids who aren't born yet will sit." And Amaranth, kneeling in the dirt in the gold light beside the gardener who had given her the flower, understood that she had not just arrived somewhere. She had become part of the place. She was planted now. She was the garden too.

❦

I want to tell you what it is to be a portal, since that is the thing I am that the others are not, and you have walked all this way and earned the explaining.

The Threshold is a door you walk through to get inside. I am a door you walk through to get further. When you stand in my northern opening and look out, you do not see a room. You see the meadow, and past the meadow the park, and past the park the rest of the island, and past the island — if you look the way I have learned to look, the long way, the way that takes years to learn — you see the future. Not a vision, nothing so dramatic. You see, simply, that there is more. That the procession does not end at me. That north of me is more grass and more light and more room, and

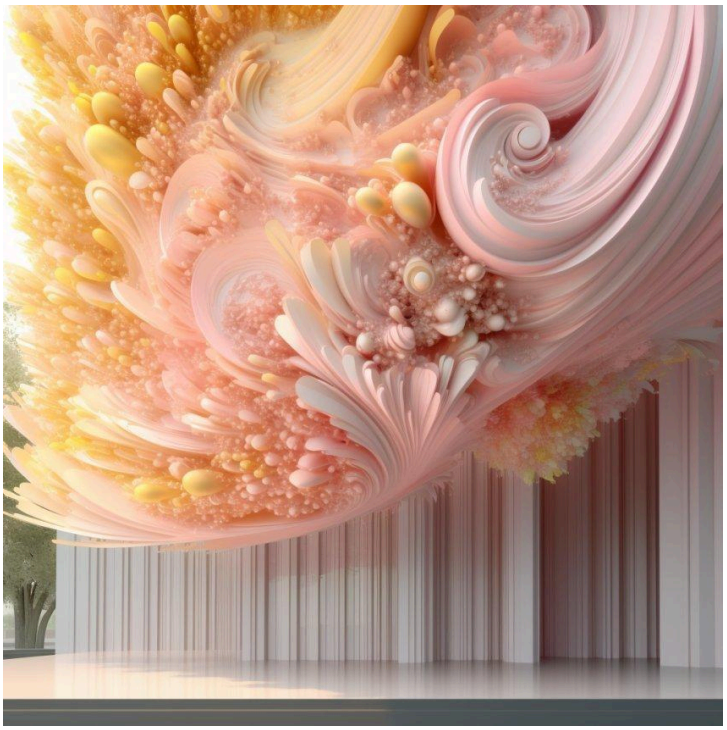
people walking into it, generations of them, each one planting the garden a little further out for the ones behind.

That is what I show people. I stand them in my gold opening and I let them look north and I let them feel, in the warmth and the light and the open green, the truth of it: that they are not at the end of anything. That they are near the front of a line that goes forward as far as the line behind them goes back. Rosemary's notebook has a front full of the dead and a back filling up with the living, and standing in my opening you can feel the back of that notebook stretching forward into pages not yet written, names not yet born, children who will run through a Threshold one day with no fear at all because the fear will have been planted out of the world like a weed, season by season, by people like Cass, like June, like Amaranth, like you.

A person stood in my opening once, an older person, near Rosemary's age, one of the ones who came to their truth late, at fifty, at sixty, having spent most of a life not allowed to know themselves. They stood in my gold opening and looked north at the meadow and the future-garden, and they were quiet a long time, and then they said, with a grief I will not pretend was not real, "I'm glad it's coming. I'm glad it's coming for them. I just wish it had come for me. I wish I'd had this when I was young." And I did the only true thing I could do, which was not to argue them out of the grief, because the grief was right, it should have come for them when they were young, the world failed them and that failure was real and deserved its grief. But I warmed my gold around them and I said, in the way a warm room says it: It came for you now. Now is not nothing. You are standing in it now. And every season you stand in it now, you make it come a little earlier for the next one. The young person who won't have to wait — that's partly you. You're planting that, just by being here, just by being whole at last in the light. The grief is true. And so is this. You can hold them both. I hold them both for you.

The older person stood in my gold a long while. And then they did something I treasure: they took out a small notebook of their own — they had started one, in imitation of Rosemary, a back-of-the-book of the living — and they wrote down their own name in it, late, at sixty, the first name in their book, themselves, a life and not a loss. And then they walked out into the meadow, into the future-garden, and they sat down under one of Cass's slow trees, the one that will not give real shade for twenty years, and they sat in the thin young shade of it, the shade that was mostly promise, and they were, for that golden afternoon, simply happy. Late. But not too late. Now is not nothing.

PLATE III · *The Meadow Pavilion*



The ornament cresting like a wave of light

I am the Meadow Pavilion and I face the future, and there is more of the future to show you, because the future is large and I have only shown you its nearest, warmest edge. Let me tell you

about the winter, and about the ones who come back gold, and about what I see when I look as far north as I can see.

People do not expect me to tell them about winter. I am gold; I am noon; I am the warm horizon. Surely, they think, the Meadow has nothing to do with winter. But I face the future, and the future has winters in it, every future does, and a pavilion that only knew summer would be no use to anyone in the cold. So I will tell you the truth about my winter, which is the truest hopeful thing I know.

In winter my meadow goes brown and bare. Cass's future-garden, all those slow trees and patient perennials and bulbs multiplying underground — in winter you would not know it was there. The grass dies back. The slow trees go skeletal. A person walking up through the snow to stand in my gold opening and look north sees, in winter, not a garden but a brown empty field, and the gold of me looks thin against the gray sky, and the whole bright procession can feel, in the deep of winter, like something half-imagined, like a summer that is never coming back.

And here is what I have learned to say to people in the winter, the hardest and most important thing I say all year: it is still there. The garden. Everything Cass planted. It is all still there, under the brown and the snow, doing the slow patient work that gardens do in winter, which is not nothing, which is the opposite of nothing, which is the most important work of all — the roots are going down. In the winter the garden does not grow up where you can see it. It grows down, into the dark, into the cold ground, deeper, anchoring, getting ready. The bulbs are multiplying underground exactly when the surface looks deadest. The slow trees are putting their roots down further in the cold than they ever do in the warm. The winter is not the absence of the garden. The winter is the garden doing its deep dark necessary work where you cannot watch it.

I tell people this in their own winters too, because everyone has them — the seasons when the joy goes brown and bare, when the loud festival feels half-imagined, when a person stands in their own life and sees only the empty field and cannot believe the garden was ever real. And what I say to a person in their winter is what I say to the meadow: it is still there. Everything you grew in the warm seasons is still there, under the brown, doing the deep work. You are not back at the beginning. You are not empty. You are wintering, which is a thing the garden does on purpose, a thing that makes the spring possible, a thing where the roots go down precisely because the surface has gone quiet. Hold on. The gold comes back. I have seen every winter on this island turn, every single one, into spring. The garden has never once failed to return. Yours will not either. It is still there. The roots are going down. Hold on.

❦

The ones who come back gold are my favorite thing to watch, and I have saved them for near the end on purpose.

I told you, back at the beginning of my telling, that the Threshold sends people north to the Arches and the Arches send them on to me, and that is the procession, dawn to coral to gold. But the procession has a secret second motion that the Threshold, facing south toward the arrivals, cannot see, and that the Arches, facing inward toward their own crowd, do not fully see either. Only I can see it, because I face north and out, and so I am the one who watches people leave — walk past me, out of the gold opening, into the meadow and the park and the rest of their lives north and beyond.

And I watch them come back.

Not all of them. Some go out into the future-garden and on into their lives and I never see them again, and that is right, that is good, the door opens both ways, we did not save them to keep them. But many come back. Seasons later, years later, they come back up the procession, and they are different, and the difference is the most beautiful thing I get to see: they come back gold. They left as people who had received the gold — who had stood in my light and felt the future warm them. And they come back as people who make the gold, who carry it, who are themselves now a kind of noon for whoever is near them. They went out as the cherished and they come back as the cherishers. They went out having been given room and they come back making room, the way the Arches taught, the way the whole island runs.

Amaranth came back gold. Of course she did. You knew she would. She went out from my meadow having bloomed, having planted her sweetheart in the future-garden, radiant and whole — and she came back, seasons later, leading. Bringing others. Walking up the procession not as a pilgrim now but as a guide, with a little cluster of frightened folded new ones around her, the way she had once been frightened and folded, and she walked them up through the rose and the coral and into my gold, and she stood them in my opening to look north at the future, and she said to them what had once been said to her, the whole long view handed over warm: it gets better, I promise, look, look north, that's coming, that's for you, it was always going to be for you.

She had become the procession. That is the secret second motion, the one only I can see from where I face: the people the procession saves become the procession. The road is not the three of us, the Threshold and the Arches and me. The road is everyone who ever walked it and turned around to walk the next ones up. Amaranth is the road now. Rosemary is the road. June and Cass and Tible are the road. The children running unafraid in my future-garden will be the road. And you, when you have walked it — you will be the road too, for someone, somewhere, whether or not there is a pavilion there to help you, because you will have learned the only thing the pavilions really teach, which is how to make room, how to hold a door, how to be gold for someone in their dawn.

❦

And what I see when I look as far north as I can see, I will tell you last, and then I will let you go, because you have walked a long way and the telling should not outlast the walk.

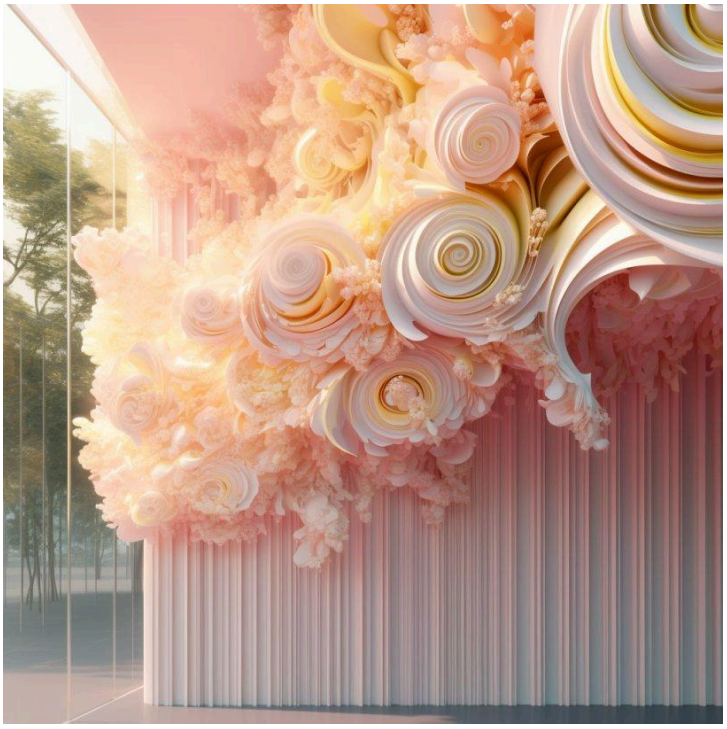
When I look north, past the meadow, past the park, past the future-garden Cass keeps extending every year, past the edge of even what Cass has planted — I see the island change. Slowly, over a long time, longer than one life, but I see it, because I am built to see far. I see the muttering blocks go quiet, the way the neighborhood around the Threshold went quiet, not by force but by the slow irresistible persuasion of watching joy until the watching becomes joining. I see the stretches of old world between the pavilions get planted over, season by season, with the future-garden, until there is no stretch of old world left to walk through, until the whole island is the garden, until the pavilions are no longer needed as refuges and stand instead as what they would most love to be: not shelters from a hard world but monuments in a kind one, beautiful loud gold places where a people that is no longer hunted gathers simply to celebrate how far the light has come.

I see children who will never know the frightened face. I see the front of Rosemary's notebook, the long list of the ones who came too early, finally answered — not erased, never erased, always read, always held, always grieved — but answered, by an island and then a world where no more names need be written in that front part ever again, where the whole book is the back part, the living part, the part that got to stay.

I see, as far north as I can see and then a little further by faith, a future so bright and so wide and so full of room that I cannot make out its edges, and walking into it, laughing, unafraid, gold, are all of us — the ones who built the Threshold by longing, the ones who walk the procession now, the children not yet born, and you, you who have read all the way to here, walking into the bright future that was always, always going to have room for you.

That is the long view. I have handed it to you as warm as I know how. Now go north, out of my gold opening, into your own life, and carry the gold with you, and be a noon for someone in their dawn, and plant a little of the future wherever you are, for the ones not yet here.

I am the Meadow Pavilion. I have seen the future and it is for you. Welcome home. You made it. There was always going to be room.



Light made architecture — the future-garden beyond

June and Cass were married in my meadow, and I will tell you about it, because it was the brightest day I have held, and because of what it meant.

They did not have to be married. I want to say that plainly. No one on this island needs a ceremony to make their love real; the love is real because it is love, and the island holds it because the island holds all of us, married or not, partnered or not, alone or in love or somewhere lovely in between. June and Cass were not made more real by the marrying. But they wanted it. They wanted to stand up in the gold light in front of everyone they loved and say the thing out loud, because saying the true thing out loud in front of your people, in a safe place, in the warm light — that is its own joy, and joy needs no further justification than itself. They wanted to be loud about their love, the way the Arches taught everyone to be loud, and where better to be loud about a love built for the future than in me, the pavilion of the future, the gold portal, with the whole meadow they planted together stretching north behind them.

Everyone came. The whole procession emptied itself north for the day, the way it does for the festival. Rosemary came up from the Threshold with the notebook. Tible came up from the Arches and cooked in my gold light for two days and would not hear a word about resting. And Amaranth — Amaranth stood up beside June and Cass as the one who held the rings, the place of highest honor, because by then Amaranth was as close to the two of them as family, was family, the family you find and choose, which the people on this island know is every bit as real as the other kind and sometimes a good deal more loving.

June played at their own wedding. Of course June did. June had finished, for the occasion, the long song begun in the Arches' garden and added to season after season, the slow song for the slow garden, and June played it through whole for the first time, all the seasons of it at once, and it was a song about building something for the future out of love, which was exactly what June and Cass had been doing all along in the dirt and the music both, so that the song and the marriage and the meadow were all finally revealed to be the same thing, one long act of planting for the ones not yet arrived. And Cass cried, dirt under their nails even at their own wedding because Cass had been planting that very morning, unable to stop, "the future doesn't take the day off just because I'm getting married." And the whole gold meadow of people cried and laughed in the full braid of it, and I poured my brightest gold down over all of them, the most light I have ever made, every gold curve of me blazing, because this was the thing, this was the whole thing, this was what the Threshold opened its door for and what the Arches got loud for and what I face the future to find: two people of our own kind, standing in the open light, unafraid, in love, surrounded by their found family, planting a garden for children not yet born. If you had told the names in the front of Rosemary's notebook that this day was coming, they might not have survived the hope of it. But it came. I held it. It was real. I was there.

When June and Cass said the true thing out loud, the whole meadow got loud the way the Arches taught them, loud as the festival, loud as the joined voice that rises out of the highest arch, and I caught all that gold loudness and I sent it north, out over the meadow and the park and the future-garden, north into the open where the future is, so that the children not yet born might somehow feel it coming toward them across the years, the sound of a wedding in the gold light, the sound of their world being made safe and bright before they ever arrive in it.

❦

And now the children, because I promised you the children, and because they are the future I face, made small and immediate and running across my meadow shrieking with a joy that has never once been taught to be quiet.

They come to me now in numbers. The ones born to the brave parents, the ones who will grow up never having stood frightened across an avenue, never having folded themselves small, never having wondered if there was room — because they will have always known there was room, will have run through the Threshold at a dead sprint as a matter of course, will have eaten Tible's food and danced in the Arches and learned to be loud about themselves before they ever learned there was a world that wanted them quiet. They come to my meadow and they run in Cass's future-garden, under the slow trees that are finally, season by season, beginning to give real shade, the shade that was planted for them before they were born and is now, exactly as Cass promised, theirs.

I watch them and I face the future and for once the two are the same direction, because they are the future, running right in front of me in the gold light. And I will tell you what I have learned from watching them, the thing that is the whole long view boiled down to its brightest drop: they are not afraid. That is the future. That is the entire future, contained in one fact. The children who grow up on this island, in this procession, in this light, do not carry the frightened face that was written into the Threshold. It is being unwritten. Season by season, child by child, the fear is being planted out of us like a weed, and what is growing up in its place is this: children who assume, with the total assumption of the cherished, that of course the world is for them, that of course there is room, that of course they may be loud and gold and entirely themselves and surrounded by love. They assume it the way the morning light assumes the avenue. And because they assume it, they will build it, further north, further out, for the children after them, and so on, and so on, as far ahead as I can see and then further, past where even I can see, into a future so bright I can only feel its warmth coming back toward me like the heat of a noon I will not live to stand in but am so glad, so unspeakably glad, is coming.

Rosemary met one of these children in my meadow, near the end. Rosemary was very old by then. Rosemary had read the names in the front of the notebook for so many years, the names of the ones who came too early, and Rosemary had begun, in the last seasons, to read the back of the notebook too, the living names, the children's names, more and more of those each year. And one gold afternoon a small child ran up to Rosemary in the meadow and asked, the way children ask, with no preamble at all, "What's the book?" And Rosemary, who had answered that question once before, years ago, to a different child, gave the same answer, because it was still true and would always be true: "These are the people who built this place. They built it by wanting it. And because they wanted it, you get to run around in here. So when you're having fun, that's them being glad."

And the child, this new child, looked at the book, and looked up at Rosemary, very old now in the gold light, and the child said, "Are you going to be in the front part or the back part?"

Rosemary laughed. I caught the laugh and held it gently, the way the Arches would have. Because it was the perfect question, the only question, the question the whole notebook had always been asking: are you a loss or a life? And Rosemary, who had spent so many years reading the front, the losses, the ones who came too early — Rosemary looked out across my gold meadow at the running unafraid children, at June and Cass married under their slow trees, at Amaranth grown radiant and whole, at the future-garden stretching north into more room than the front of the book could ever have dreamed, and Rosemary said: "Oh, sweetheart. I'm in the back. I got to stay. I got to see all this. I'm in the back part of the book, with the living, with you. I came late but I got to stay, and that's the best thing that ever happened to me, getting to stay and see it." And Rosemary wrote, on the next clean page of the back of the book, with a hand grown slow, their own name, late, among the living, a life and not a loss, and then the child's name under it, and the child watched their own name go into the same book as all the people who built the place by wanting it, and the child understood, the

way children understand the things that matter, that they were part of something that went back and back and forward and forward, and that they were, gloriously, in the back part, the living part, the part that got to stay.

❦

I am the Meadow Pavilion. I am gold, and I face the future, and my section is the last, because there is nothing north of me but the open and the future and the bright laughing room of everything still to come.

I want to leave you the way I leave everyone who stands in my gold opening and looks north: with the long view, handed over warm. Here it is, one more time, the whole of it.

It begins in rose, at a doorway, with a frightened person who almost goes back to the train and does not. It warms into coral, into a loud safe room with music and food and love, where the frightened person learns to be joyful in front of others, learns to sing at full height. And it arrives in gold, in the open meadow at the edge of the park, where the person stands in the noon light, unafraid, planted, part of the garden, looking north into a future so bright it warms the years before it. That is the procession. That is the morning. That is the whole arc of the light across the island, and across a life, and across the generations, dawn to noon, fear to joy, loss to life, the front of the book to the back.

And the thing I most want you to carry away, north, out of my gold opening into your own life — the thing the Threshold knows and the Arches know and I know, the thing the whole island was built to say — is this: there is room. There was always going to be room. The ones in the front of the book longed it into being before you were born; the ones in the back of the book are keeping the door open and planting the garden further north every season; and the children not yet arrived are the proof that it is working, that the fear is being unwritten, that the future is bright and wide and golden and coming, coming, already warm on the horizon, already pouring down the avenues toward you like light from a pitcher.

Come north. Stand in my gold a while. Look at what's coming. And then go plant a little of it, wherever you are, for the ones not yet here.

I am the Meadow Pavilion, and I have seen the future, and it is for you. It was always going to be for you.

Welcome home. You made it. You were never too late, and you were never too much, and there was always, always going to be room.

The whole procession, rose through gold, as one span

CHORUS — THE THREE PAVILIONS SPEAK TOGETHER

We have each told you our own telling, dawn and coral and gold, and now we want to speak together, all three at once, because there are things none of us can say alone that we can say as a chorus. The Threshold cannot see the Meadow; the Meadow cannot hear the Arches; we stand a long island apart. But we are one procession, and a procession has a voice that is more than the sum of its stations, and that voice wants a turn before the book closes.

We want to tell you, together, about the night the lights went out across the city.

It was a winter night, deep winter, the kind the Meadow warned you about, when the future-garden has gone brown and the gold looks thin against the gray. And the power failed. All across the island the lights went out, block after block, the great grid of the city going dark in waves, and the cold came in, and the old fear came with it, the way the old fear always comes in the dark. People were frightened. Not only our people — everyone, the whole island, frightened together in the sudden dark and cold.

And here is what happened, and we tell it together because each of us saw only our part and the whole is only visible as a chorus:

The Threshold's lights stayed on. The small warm lights the child had strung along its curves, the rose glow in the dark — those were not on the city's grid. They ran on something else, something the children had rigged, a stubborn independent warmth. And so when the whole island went dark, there was one rose glow left burning up in Washington Heights, one lit door in all the cold dark city, and people saw it. Not only our people. Everyone. Frightened people from all over the dark neighborhood, drawn the way the cold draws everyone toward any light, came up the hill toward the one warm rose glow, came to the open door, and the Threshold did what it does, the only thing it does, the thing it has never once stopped doing: it stayed open. It let them in. All of them. It did not check who they were or whether they belonged. The whole entrance requirement, on the coldest darkest night, was the same as Tible's table: you are cold, you are frightened, come in, there is room.

And the Arches, down in Harlem, also dark on the grid but warm in the way that matters, did what the Arches do: Tible cooked. In the dark, by the light of the gas flames, Tible cooked for everyone who came, and the everyone who came was, again, not only our people but the whole cold frightened neighborhood, and Tible fed them all by the same rule, no one asked to prove they deserved it, you are hungry, sit down, eat. And in the dark warm crowded Arches, frightened strangers who would never otherwise have shared a table shared one, fed by the same hands, and the language we made spread to them without anyone teaching it, make room, there is room, and they made room for each other in the dark, all of them, our people and the strangers both, because that is

what the dark does when there is a warm fed room in the middle of it: it dissolves the lines that the daylight draws.

And the Meadow, at the green edge, did the thing only the Meadow can do, the thing it is built for: it faced the future, even in the dark, even in the deep winter, and it said to everyone who made it that far north through the cold, the same thing it always says, the long view handed over warm: it gets better, the light comes back, hold on, the grid will come back on and so will the spring, the garden is still there under the brown doing its deep work, this dark is not the end of anything, it is only a night, and the morning is coming, the morning always comes, look north, you can almost feel it.

The lights came back, eventually, the way they do. The grid woke block by block and the great electric glow of the city returned. But here is what the three of us know, as a chorus, that we could never have known alone: on the night the lights went out, the procession did not fail. It did the opposite of fail. The one rose glow that stayed lit drew the whole frightened neighborhood toward an open door; the warm fed room dissolved the lines between our people and the strangers; the gold voice at the green edge promised everyone, everyone, that the morning was coming. On the coldest darkest night, the procession was not a refuge for some against the others. It was a light for all of them, together, in the dark. And when the grid came back and the daylight returned and the lines the daylight draws came back with it — some of them did not come back. Some of the strangers who had been fed at Tible's table in the dark did not go back to being strangers. They had made room for our people in the cold, and our people had made room for them, and you cannot fully un-make room once it has been made. That is the thing only the chorus can tell you: the procession is not only for us. It is for us first, it is for us on purpose, the door is for us and we will never apologize for that. But a thing built to make room cannot, in the end, make room only for some. The grammar will not allow it. Make room means make room. The light that stays lit in the dark lights everyone who comes toward it. That is not a dilution of what we are. That is the fullest flower of it. The most radically queer thing a safe place can finally become is a safe place that, without ever ceasing to be ours, turns out to have been big enough for everyone all along.

We are the three pavilions, and that is what we wanted to say together, that none of us could say alone. Now back to our own tellings, and then we will let Surjan close the book. But remember the night the lights went out. Remember that the rose glow stayed lit. Remember that it lit everyone. There was always going to be room. We did not know, until the dark, quite how much room. It turned out to be more than even we had dreamed. It always turns out to be more.

THE PEOPLE, YEARS ON

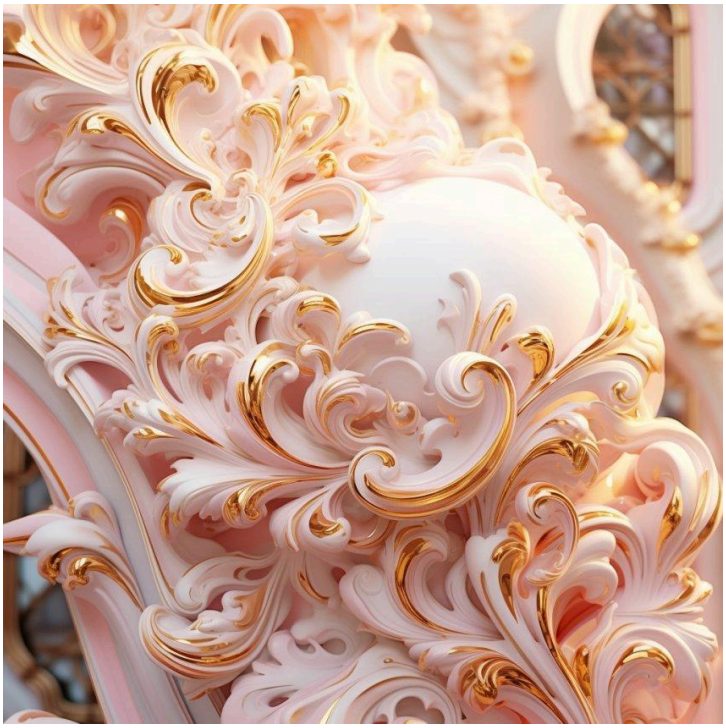
We want, also together, to tell you what became of the people, because you have walked the whole island with them and you deserve to know how their stories went, as far as we can see them from our three vantages joined.

Amaranth became the road, as the Meadow told you — a guide, leading the frightened folded new ones up through the rose and coral into the gold. But there is more. Amaranth, who arrived owning only what was in one bag, who almost went back to the train, eventually did the thing that completes the circle: Amaranth built a fourth pavilion. Not on the island. Somewhere else, some other city, some other place where there was no procession yet and people were still standing frightened across avenues from their own lives. Amaranth went there — the door opens both ways, you did not save us to keep us — and Amaranth longed a new threshold into being the way the front of Rosemary's notebook longed the first one, and now there is a procession beginning somewhere else too, because the deepest thing the island teaches is not how to be saved but how to build the saving for others. Amaranth is the front of someone else's notebook now. Amaranth is the longing that will become a door.

Rosemary grew very old and stayed, as Rosemary always wanted, at the beginning, with the names. And when Rosemary's own time came, it came in the rose light of an early morning at the Threshold, with the notebook open, in the middle of reading the names — the best death any of us could imagine for the one who carried the dead so long, to go while speaking their names in the warm rose light of the open door. Rosemary's name is in the book now, in the back part, the living part, written in Rosemary's own slow hand on the day Rosemary met the child who asked the perfect question. "I'm in the back. I got to stay. I got to see all this." Rosemary got to stay long enough to see all this, and then Rosemary's name passed gently from the back of the book toward the front, from the living to the remembered, but never to the part of the front that grieves the ones who came too early — because Rosemary did not come too early. Rosemary came late and got to stay and got to see the garden bloom. There is a grief in losing Rosemary, but it is the good grief, the grief of a long full life completed in the light, the grief that is mostly gratitude. The children still ask about the old person who carried the book. The guides still read Rosemary's name. Make room, the book says, and there is room in it now for Rosemary too, held, remembered, gold.

June and Cass are still planting and still playing, growing old together among the slow trees that finally give real shade now, the shade they planted for kids not yet born who are now, some of them, born, and running underneath it. June's long song is longer than ever; June adds to it every season still, and it has become the song the whole procession somehow knows, the one that rises as one voice at the festivals, so that June's private love song for Cass became, without June ever intending it, the anthem of the entire island — which is exactly right, which is how it should be, a love song between two genderqueer people grown into the song a whole people sings, because that is what our love is, when the world finally makes room for it: not a private exception but the common song, the thing everyone knows the words to even though no one taught it.

And Tible feeds everyone still, and laughs the laugh that is part of the Arches' architecture now, and the table grows longer every year, and the rule has never changed and never will: you are hungry, sit down, eat, no one asked to prove they deserve it. Tible is teaching others to cook now, the young ones, so that when Tible's own time comes the table will not go cold, the revolution-that-is-a-kitchen will keep its fires lit. "The future doesn't take the day off," Cass said at their wedding, and Tible's kitchen is the proof of it, warm through every winter, fed through every dark, the longest table in the world with a seat for everyone who is hungry, which is everyone, which has always been everyone, which is the whole point.



Rose meeting gold — the single pearl at the heart of the scrollwork

AFTERWORD

It is me one last time. Surjan. The pavilions have said their say, dawn and coral and gold, and I want to close the book the way I opened it, plainly, in my own voice, because there are a few true things I owe you before I let you go.

The first is that none of this is a metaphor. Or — it is a metaphor, of course it is, I am not a fool, there are no literal talking pavilions of sugar standing on the avenues of upper Manhattan, you will not find them if you take the train uptown tomorrow. But I want to tell you that it is also not only a metaphor, and that the not-only is the part that matters. Because the procession is real. I have walked it. Not as pink buildings but as the thing the pink buildings stand for: the doorways that real people have held open for me, the loud safe rooms where I learned to be joyful in front of others, the gold afternoons when someone older and wiser turned me around to face the future and let the warmth of it reach me. Those were real. They had names, those doorways and rooms and afternoons; they had faces; I have changed the faces into pavilions to protect the people and to make the shape of it visible, but the shape is true. There is a procession. It runs through every queer life that gets to be lived all the way out. It is made of people. You are on it. You have been on it the whole time you have been reading.

The second true thing is that I made it bright on purpose, and I want to defend that, because someone will say it was too bright, that I left out the dark, that a true book about queer life owes more grief than I have paid. I have thought about this. And here is my answer: the grief is in here. It is in the front of Rosemary's notebook. It is in the person who came too early, the one June wrote the song for. It is in the elder who came to their truth at sixty and grieved the years. It is in my own history, which I did not hand you, but which is in here in the shape of the bench I almost did not get up from. The grief is in here. I did not leave it out. But I refused to let it run the book, because grief has run quite enough books, and quite enough lives, and I wanted — I needed — to write one where the joy got to run things for once, where the dark was real but the gold was realer, where a genderqueer reader could open a book about people like them and find, for once, not a tragedy, not a cautionary tale, not a careful balancing of pain and hope, but radical, insistent, unembarrassed joy. That was the whole point. That was the radical part. To insist on the joy precisely because the world has been so generous with our grief. The Arches taught me: when they hand you silence, sing louder. This whole book is me singing louder. I will not apologize for the brightness. The brightness is the argument.

The third true thing is that it is for everyone, and I mean everyone, even the ones who might be surprised to find themselves welcome in a book like this. I wrote it for the genderqueer and non-binary reader first, plainly, without hedging — for the one standing frightened across the avenue from their own life, for the one who almost went back to the train. You are the reason. You are who the door is for. But the procession does not work by shutting anyone out; its whole grammar is

make room, and you cannot have a make-room book that shuts the door behind it. So it is for the parents who decided their child would grow up with the door already open. It is for the neighborhoods that changed their minds by watching joy. It is even, in the patient way of Tible's table, for the sneerer who wandered in armored and left fed. There is room. That is the one rule. There was always going to be room.

And the last true thing, the one I most want to leave you with, is the one the Meadow says best but I will say it in my own plain way too: it gets better, and you are part of why. Not in the thin way it gets said. In the true way. The world for people like us is becoming, slowly and unevenly and with terrible setbacks that are real and that I will not pretend away — becoming, on the whole, over time, by the slow irresistible persuasion of joy, a world with more room in it. And the reason it is becoming that is people like you, walking the procession at your full height, holding the door for the next one, being gold for someone in their dawn. You are not waiting for the better world. You are the better world, arriving. Every time you make room, it arrives a little more. Every time you are joyful in public, unafraid, it arrives a little more. You are the future-garden, planting itself.

So close the book now, and go north — wherever north is for you, whatever direction your own better light is pouring from. Hold a door. Feed someone. Sing louder. Plant something for a kid who isn't born yet. And the next time you find yourself standing frightened across the avenue from something you want and are not sure is allowed to be yours — remember the Threshold, and walk forward anyway, because the answer is yes, the answer was always going to be yes:

It is for you. It was always going to be for you. There was always, always going to be room.

Come north. I will see you on the procession.

— Surjan

NOTES FROM THE PROCESSION

A few things did not fit cleanly into the tellings, and I did not want to lose them, so I have gathered them here at the back, the way you keep the loose photographs that did not fit the album in an envelope tucked inside its back cover. These are my notes. Surjan's notes. Read them or skip them; the book is whole without them. But I love them, and so here they are.

On the word "queer." I use it throughout, and I want to say why, because some readers carry old wounds in that word and I do not use it carelessly. I use it because it is the word wide enough to hold all of us at once — the genderqueer and the non-binary, the in-between and the entire, everyone the simple old categories could not contain. The pavilions are queer architecture not because they belong to one identity but because they refuse the whole logic of being contained, of fitting the box, of being only one thing. A baroque pavilion of sugar that is also a doorway that is also a conscious narrator that is also a metaphor that is also, somehow, real — that is a queer building, queer in its very grammar, refusing to be only what it is supposed to be. I am like that. You may be like that. The word is a door, not a box. I use it the way I use every door in this book: held open.

On the colors. People have asked me why these three colors, rose and coral and gold, and not the whole rainbow we are so often given as our flag. I love the rainbow; this is not a rejection of it. But I wanted the colors of a single sunrise specifically, because a sunrise is one continuous thing, not six stripes with borders between them. The rose becomes the coral becomes the gold with no line where one stops and the next starts; you cannot say exactly where dawn ends and morning begins. That is truer to us, I think, than stripes. We do not come in discrete bands. We come in gradients. We become. The procession is a gradient from fear to joy to hope, from rose to gold, with no borders, because the truest things do not have borders, they have transitions, long warm blendings, one thing becoming the next so gradually that the becoming is the whole point.

On grief, again. I keep coming back to it, I know, in a book that is supposed to be about joy. But I have learned that the people who most need a joyful book are exactly the people who carry the most grief, and that they can smell a false joy from across a room, a joy that has not been anywhere near grief, a joy that is really just denial wearing a bright coat. So I want to be clear one more time: the joy in this book has been to the grief and come back. It is not joy instead of grief. It is joy that has held the grief, sat with it through the all-night, read its names in the rose dawn, and chosen joy anyway, on purpose, as the harder and braver thing. That is the only joy worth writing a book about. The other kind, the kind that has never met grief, is just weather. This kind is a decision. I wanted to write about the decision.

On the children. I put a great deal of the book's hope into the children, the ones who grow up unafraid, who run at the Threshold at a dead sprint, who assume there is room the way the morning

assumes the avenue. And I want to say to any reader who did not get that childhood — who grew up afraid, folded small, certain there was no room — that the book is not leaving you behind by loving the children. The unafraid children are not a reproach to you. They are your victory. They are unafraid because people like you walked the procession at your full height where they could see it, held the door, planted the garden. You did not get the childhood. So you made it, for them. That is not a smaller thing than getting it. It might be the larger thing. The ones in the front of Rosemary's notebook did not get anything at all, and they built the first door by longing alone. To not have gotten it and to build it anyway for the next ones — that is the most radical position in the whole book, and if it is yours, then this book is most of all for you, and the running unafraid children are most of all your doing.

On whether it is realistic. Someone will say the book is a fantasy, that real life for people like us is harder than three magic pavilions and a happy ending, that I have written a consolation rather than a truth. I have thought about this more than anything. And here is where I have landed: it is not a prediction, it is an instruction. I am not telling you the world is already the procession. I am telling you how to build the procession, in a world that is not yet it. Hold the door. Feed the hungry. Sing louder when they hand you silence. Make room. Plant for the kid not yet born. These are not fantasies. These are things you can do this week, in the actual unmagical world, and every time you do one the procession gets one pavilion longer. The book is realistic in the only way that matters: everything in it is a thing a real person can actually do. The magic is just the instructions made beautiful enough to follow.

On the ending. There is no real ending, you will have noticed. The Meadow faces north into a future it cannot see the edge of; the procession keeps growing; Amaranth goes off to build a fourth pavilion somewhere else entirely. I did that on purpose. A book about a people who were told for so long that they had no future could not, in good conscience, end. To end it would be to draw a border, and I told you what I think of borders. So it does not end. It opens. It is a door, like everything else in it, and it opens outward, onto more room, onto your life, onto whatever you go build after you close it. The last word cannot be mine. The last word is whatever you do next.

On love. I almost did not write about June and Cass, because love stories are easy to do badly and I did not want to reduce two whole people to a romance. But I could not leave love out, because love is so much of what the world tried to deny us — not only the grand romantic kind but every kind, the love of a found family, of a table you are welcome at, of an old person who reads your name into a safe place, of a gardener who plants for strangers not yet born. The book is full of love of every kind, and June and Cass are only its most concentrated form, the place where it gets a name and a wedding. But the love is everywhere. Tible loves by feeding. Rosemary loves by remembering. Cass loves by planting. The pavilions love by staying open, getting loud, facing forward. Love in this book is mostly a verb, mostly something you do, and that, too, is on purpose, because the love that saved my life was not mostly a feeling that happened to me. It was mostly things people did. Doors

they held. Meals they made. Names they spoke. That is the love I wanted to write. The kind with its sleeves rolled up.

On you. I will end the notes where I end everything, with you, because you are the reason and you have been the reason the whole time. I do not know who you are. You might be standing frightened across the avenue from your own life right now, this book open in your hands like a lit rose door up the hill. You might be years into your own procession, gold already, reading this to remember the dawn. You might not be one of us at all, might have wandered in like a sneerer to Tible's table and found yourself, against all your armor, fed. It does not matter which. The book is for you. The door is for you. There is room. There was always going to be room. Whatever avenue you are standing frightened across right now — walk forward. The answer is yes. It was always going to be yes.

— Surjan

CODA — THE ISLAND SPEAKS

I have let everyone else speak, and now, at the very end, I will say a few words myself, though I almost never do, because I am slow to speak and the things I have to say take a long time to say and most who walk me are gone before I finish a sentence. I am the island. I am Manhattan. I am the long stone fish lying in the salt water between two rivers, and I have been here a great deal longer than the pavilions, and I will be here a great deal longer than this book, and I want to tell you, before you go, what I have seen from underneath all of it.

I have held many kinds of people on my back. I have been generous and I have been cruel, or rather the people on me have been, building toward the sky and also building walls, making room and also making the opposite of room, and for a long time, a long time, the people like the ones in this book — the genderqueer, the in-between and entire, the ones the simple categories could not hold — were among the ones I was made to be cruel to. Not by my own wish. An island has no wishes; an island only holds what is built on it. But I held the cruelty when it was built, the closed doors, the muttering blocks, the long list that became the front of Rosemary's notebook. I held all of that. I am not innocent of it. An island that has been here as long as I have is innocent of nothing.

And then the pavilions rose. I felt them come up out of my stone, rose and coral and gold, longed into being by people who had decided that the cruelty I had been made to hold was not the only thing I could hold. And I will tell you what it was like, from underneath, to feel them rise: it was like being forgiven. Not by being told I was innocent — I told you, I am innocent of nothing — but by being given, late, a chance to hold something better. To hold a door instead of a wall. To hold a feast instead of a famine. To hold a garden planted for children not yet born instead of a list of children who came too early and were lost. The pavilions did not erase what I had held before. The front of the notebook is still the front of the notebook. But they gave me, an old guilty island, a way to hold something new, and I have held it as carefully as I have ever held anything, because it is the best thing I have ever been asked to carry.

Here is what I see, from underneath, that no one walking my surface can quite see: I see that it is spreading. The pavilions think of themselves as three bright stations with ordinary walking in between, and the people think of the procession as a line up my western side. But from underneath I can feel it spreading sideways, off the line, into the blocks between, into the neighborhoods that changed their minds, into the rooms where someone held a door with no pavilion to help them, into the kitchens where someone fed a stranger by Tible's rule without ever having met Tible. It is not a line anymore. It has not been a line for a while. It is becoming a tide, a warmth spreading out from three points until the points no longer matter, until the whole island is slowly, slowly going the color of that sunrise, rose into coral into gold, with no borders, the way the truest things have no borders. I can feel it in my stone. I am warming. After all this time, after all the cruelty I was made to hold, I am warming, from three points, outward, into something I did not know an island could become.

And I will tell you the longest view of all, longer even than the Meadow's, because I am older than the Meadow and I lie here a long time after every walker is gone: it does not stop at my shores. I am an island; I am surrounded by water; you would think the warmth would stop at the rivers. But warmth does not stop at water. It crosses. Amaranth crossed it, went off my back to build a fourth pavilion on some other ground, and that other ground is warming now too, from a new point, the way I warmed. The water that surrounds me, that should have been my border, my limit, the edge of how far the room could go — the water turns out to carry the warmth rather than stop it. There are other islands. There are mainlands. There is a whole cold world that was made to hold cruelty the way I was, and it is, I believe, in the slow way I believe things, beginning to warm too, from point after point after point, each one started by someone who walked a procession somewhere and then crossed water to build the saving on new ground.

I am the island. I have held the worst and I am learning to hold the best, late, gratefully, with my old stone warming for the first time in longer than this book could hold. And I want to leave you, walker, with the thing I know that the pavilions are too young to know and Surjan is too kind to say plainly: you are not too late. I am older than all of you and I am not too late, I am only now beginning to warm, so you, whose life is so much shorter than mine and so much warmer already — you are not too late, you could not possibly be too late, you are early, you are so early, the day is barely begun, the light has only reached three points of a whole island of a whole cold world that is only now, only just now, beginning to go gold.

Walk me gently. Hold a door. The stone remembers every kindness done on its back, and I have started, at last, to have kind things to remember. Add to them. That is all an island asks. Add to the kind things I get to remember. There is room on my back for every one of them. There was always going to be room.

I am Manhattan, and I am warming, and it is because of you. Go on. Walk north. Walk anywhere. Just walk it as yourself, at your full height, and let me feel the warmth of it in my old stone, and know that the morning, the long morning, the morning that takes longer than any life to finish breaking — the morning is coming. It is already here at three bright points. It is coming for all the rest. It is coming for you.

There was always going to be room.

Catalogue of Architectural Plates

Sixteen plates documenting the ornamentation and pavilions of the Procession of Light, arranged in the order of the morning — from the rose detail of the Dawn Threshold, through the coral facades of the Gathering Arches, to the full gold of the Meadow Pavilion. Each plate is accompanied by a note relating it to the procession as the pavilions describe it.

PLATE 1 · *Detail — The Sugar Made to Pray*

A close study of the Dawn Threshold's ornamentation, taken at the height where a standing person's eye would fall: curls, scrolls, and the small round forms the pavilion itself calls "the closed fists of flowers that have not decided to open." Rose and shell-pink, threaded with cream and a restrained gold. One looks at this surface and reaches, helplessly, for sweet words — sugar, frosting, coral, cake — and the pavilion considers this the most correct description it has ever received. But the plate rewards a second look: notice that every flourish, however elaborate, bends toward the opening at the composition's edge. Nothing here is ornament for its own sake. It is all the frame around the door, and the door, the Threshold insists, is the only point that matters.

PLATE 2 · *Detail — The Spheres Among the Scrollwork*

Pale pink orbs nested in baroque foliage, lit by a low gold that seems to come from inside the forms rather than fall upon them. The spherical motif recurs the length of the procession — the pavilions' "pearls," the buds of a future not yet open — and it is instructive to encounter them here first, at the rose end of the island, where they are smallest and quietest. They are waiting. They will swell and brighten as the route moves north, until by the Meadow they are full gold globes the size of a child's embrace. Read the procession's plates in order and you watch the future ripen, sphere by sphere, from this first shy rose to that final unembarrassed gold.

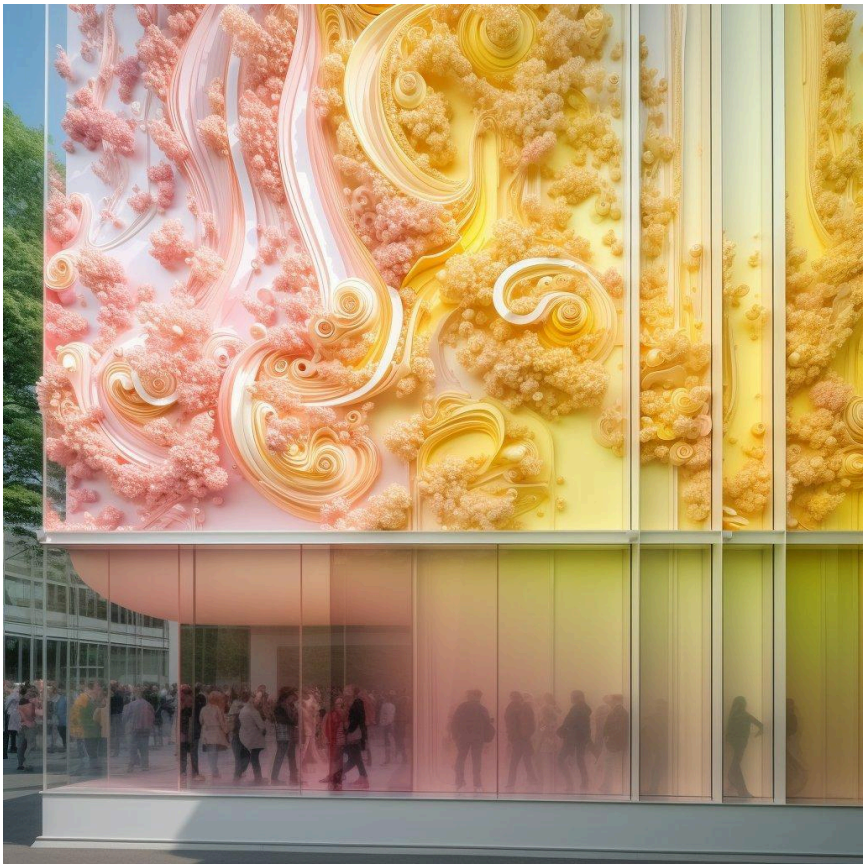


PLATE 3 · *The Threshold Facade, Morning Crowd*

The Dawn Threshold seen whole for the first time, its rose-and-gold ornament rising above a glazed lower level where a gathered crowd moves in soft focus. The structure reads, deliberately, as a doorway before it reads as a building — the eye is pulled to the opening at center before it takes in the surrounding splendor. This is the facade Amaranth saw across the avenue on the Tuesday the book begins, the one she was certain had not been there the week before and yet did not feel new, that felt, she said, like it had been waiting. The blurred figures are everyone who has ever stood where she stood and made the same brave ordinary choice: to cross, and to walk forward, through.

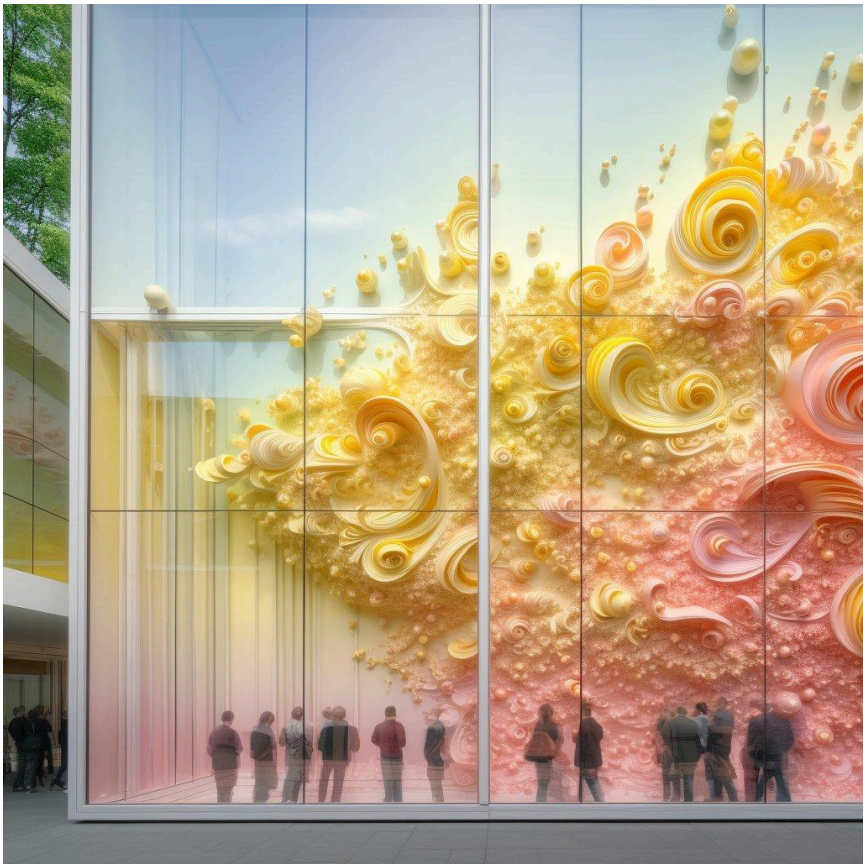


PLATE 4 · *The Threshold at Full Height*

A taller view of the Washington Heights facade, the ornament climbing toward the sky in waves of cream and gold over rose, dotted with the waiting spheres. The figures along the glass below are the night-comers and the morning-comers both — the ones who find the lit rose door from far off, from the train at midnight, from inside the worst hour of a hard night. After the year of the lights, when a child decided the pavilion was too dark and strung it with small warm bulbs, this facade glowed rose in the actual dark for the first time, and the deepest work of the Threshold became possible: to be a lit, open door at the hour when a person is most certain there is no room for them anywhere in the world.

PLATE 5 · *Interior — The Room That Goes Back and Back*

Inside the Threshold: the secret every good doorway keeps, an interior that opens onto far more room than the modest front could promise. Skylit and rose-walled, with an open gateway at the rear giving onto green, the space goes back and back, warm room beyond warm room. "That is not architecture," the pavilion tells us. "That is love, expressed in architecture." The people who longed this place into being had spent their lives being told there was no room; when they built it, they built it to be the opposite of that, all the way down. Somewhere along the left wall, out of frame, is the shelf where Rosemary keeps the notebook of names.

PLATE 6 · *Interior — The Gateway Outward*

A second interior study, the ornament flowing from rose into the first warm coral across the room toward a luminous gateway. This plate captures the principle the Threshold holds most fiercely: a door that opens only one way is not a door but a trap, and every opening here gives outward, onto more room. It is the image to hold in mind for the person who came backward — who walked the whole procession and then returned to the beginning to leave the island entirely, afraid that to walk back out was to throw the gift away. The gateway in this plate is the pavilion's answer to them: go, and go blessed, the door opens both ways, that is exactly what makes it a door.

PLATE 7 · *The Arches, Sunlit Study*

A compositional study of the Gathering Arches' three great openings — "three mouths all open in song" — their interiors crowded with the buoyant spherical forms that gather wherever the procession turns celebratory. Against a warm yellow ground, coral and rose detail tumbles inward toward the light. The buoyancy is not incidental: this is the pavilion of loudness, of the held breath finally let go, and even its ornament seems to be in motion, rising, the way a laugh rises, the way the joined voice rises at the festival from the highest curve toward the sky over Harlem.

PLATE 8 · *The Gathering Arches, Spring Facade*

The Harlem pavilion against flowering trees: pale columns rising into a crown of cream and gold ornament over a tide of rose and coral. This is the heart of the procession, the table everyone sits down at once they are through the Threshold's door. Read it knowing what happens within: Tible's kitchen warm in the corner where the morning light pools longest; the musicians who build the song bigger to fit each new player in; Cass's garden of "sweethearts" humming with bees along the eastern wall; and the colonnade where, on festival days, the dancing grows until the columns themselves seem to sway. The trees in bloom are the right frame: the Arches are the season when the procession flowers.

PLATE 9 · *The Arches in Full Voice*

The colonnade seen with its ornamentation surging between the columns like caught music, rose and gold braided through cream, small figures gathered at the base. "Put your hand on your chest," the pavilion says, "and tell me I'm wrong" — the heart is loud, and so is the Arches, every coral curve shaped to catch a laugh and throw it back doubled. This is the facade behind which June first walked in and joined a song already playing, certain they would be told their music was too much, and was instead met with grins and a key shifted to suit the guitar. It is the wall that taught a generation that being seen could be a blessing instead of a threat.

PLATE 10 · *The Arches, Golden Hour*

The pavilion's eastern face catching late coral light, the ornament blooming upward in gold and rose, a green park visible through the glazing. The eastern side is Cass's side — the strip of bare earth a gardener once crouched beside, put a hand flat to the soil, and said, "Oh, you poor thing, nobody's planted you." Out of frame below this glowing wall would be the riot Cass made of it: coral poppies, pink cosmos, tall gold flowers all called sweetheart regardless, and the bees that came all the way up into the city to find them. This is the hour, too, when June and Cass would sit among the flowers in the evening, the pavilion dimmed to its softest shade, having an ordinary unafraid evening of love — the simple enormous thing the world had tried to say they could not have.

PLATE 11 · *The Arches and the Gathered*

A wide view of the Harlem facade with a dense crowd along the glass — a festival day, or perhaps the beginning of an all-night. The joined voice rises from the highest curve of the ornament toward the sky over the city. At the festival's peak the hundreds of voices become one voice, caught and doubled in the coral arches until it is thrown up out of the highest opening — the joined, loud, unashamed voice of everyone ever told to be quiet about themselves — carried, the pavilion hopes, all the way across the river and further, all the way to wherever the names in the front of Rosemary's notebook have gone, so they might know the room they built has filled.

PLATE 12 · *The Procession Seen Whole*

A rare elevation of the entire procession compressed into a single rainbow span — rose at one edge, gold at the other — the full arc of the morning the pavilions trace across the island, from first light in Washington Heights to full noon at the park. Below, the glazed ground level holds a crowd in motion, the daily traffic of pilgrims walking north. This is the image that comes closest to the whole shape of the book: a single long sunrise made architecture, the emotional journey from fear to joy to hope laid out left to right, the promise that to walk the route is to walk inside the morning.

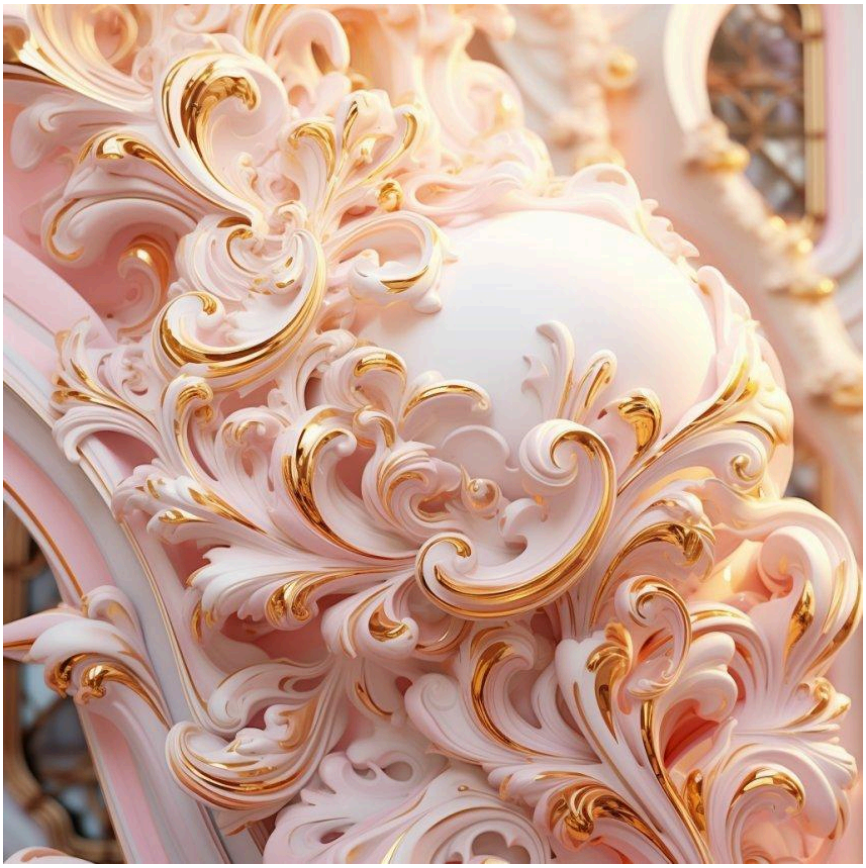


PLATE 13 · *Detail — Rose and Gold Scrollwork*

An intimate study of the baroque ornament at the precise point where rose gives way to gold, the swirls catching light like the burnished inside of a shell. At the composition's heart is a single pale sphere — the future, not yet open, the largest and calmest of all the procession's pearls. Set this plate beside the second plate in the catalogue, the small shy spheres at the rose end, and the distance between them is the distance of the whole book: the bud that arrives closed and frightened, and the same bud grown calm and luminous and nearly ready to open into the gold.

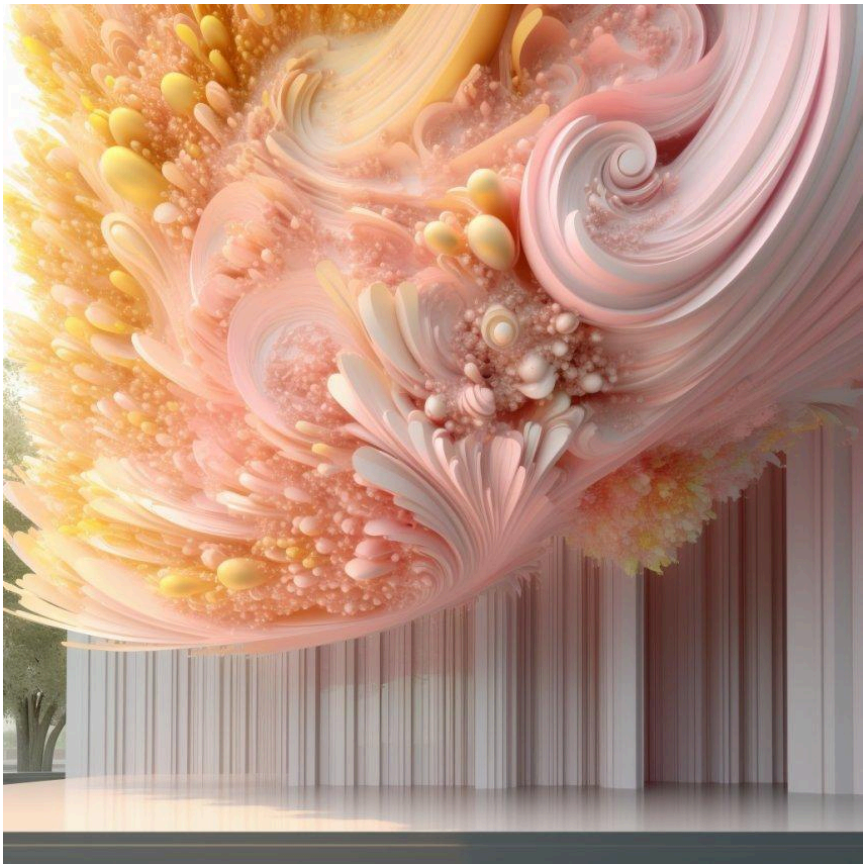


PLATE 14 · *The Meadow Pavilion, Cresting Wave*

The gold pavilion's ornament breaking over its glazed wall like a wave of light — rose and gold and cream caught at the instant of cresting, a park beyond. This is the portal at the northern edge, where the buildings of the island finally let go and the future opens north into grass and sky. The cresting form is apt: the Meadow faces forward, always, into what is coming, and what is coming, the pavilion promises, arrives like this — not as a threat breaking over you but as light, as warmth, as a wave you have been waiting your whole life to be caught up in.

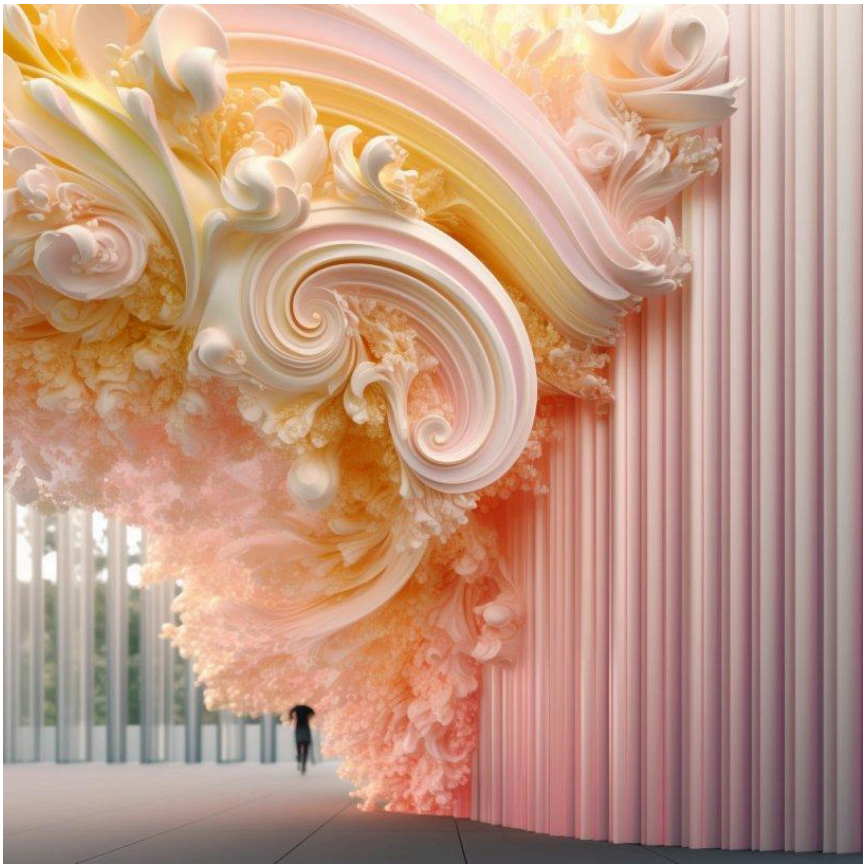


PLATE 15 · *The Meadow Pavilion, Full Gold*

The third pavilion at its warmest — full noon, full gold, the ornament a swirling cresting glory above the columns. "The gold of noon," the pavilion says, "when the day has fully arrived and decided to stay." A lone figure walks the colonnade below, dwarfed and warmed. This is the light Amaranth walked into at the end of her long change — she who had once been unable to lift her eyes — to stand in the fullest gold, lift her face into it, and laugh from the simple pleasure of being safe and whole in the warm height of the day. The plate holds that gold for you to step into yourself.

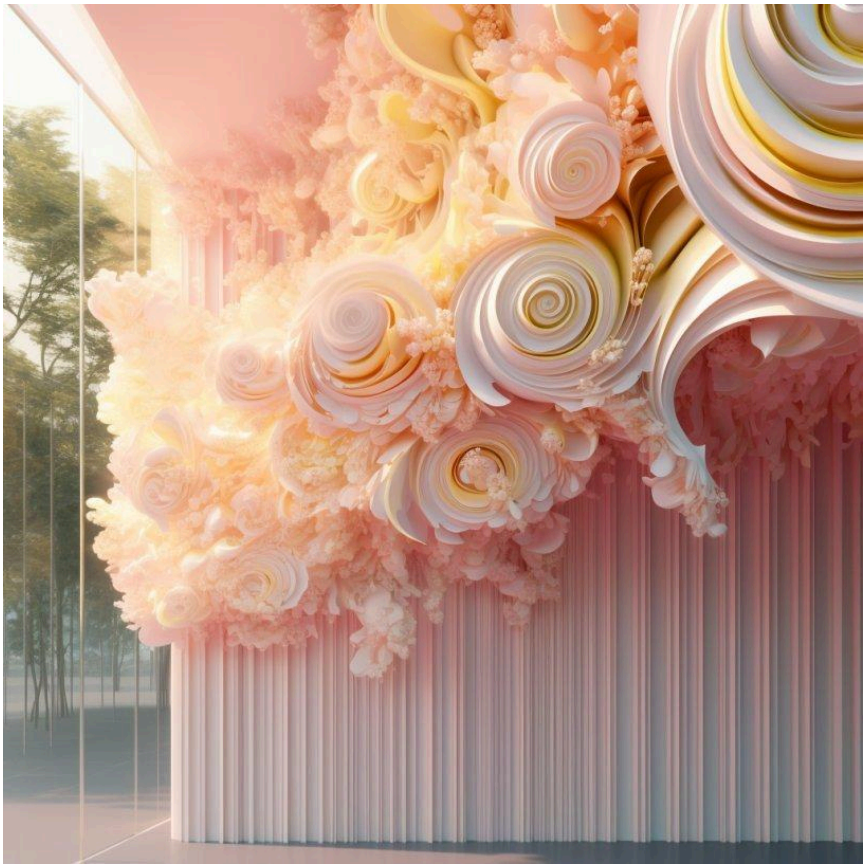
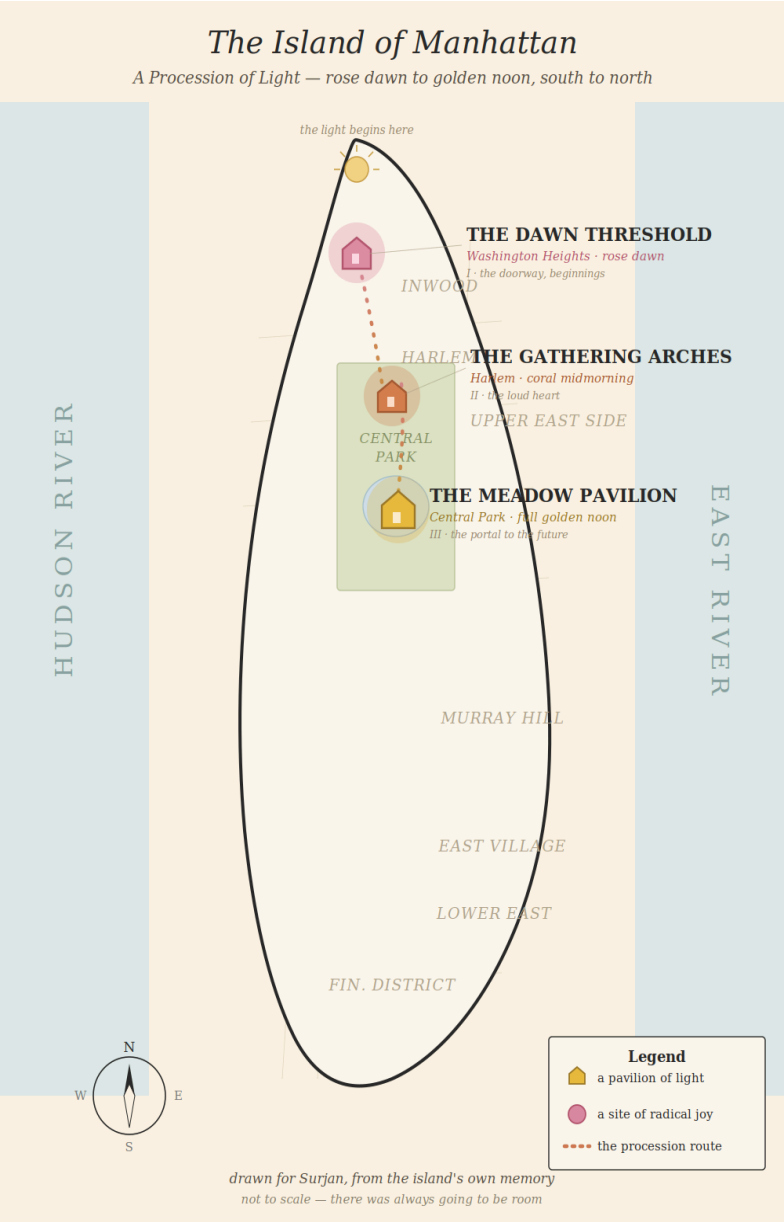


PLATE 16 · *The Meadow, Light Made Architecture*

A final study: the gold-and-rose ornament curling against the pillared wall, sunlight pouring through as though the structure were generating it rather than receiving it, a garden glimpsed at the edge. That garden is the future-garden — the slow trees and patient perennials Cass planted knowing they would not see the full glory of them, the trees that take twenty years to give real shade, planted for the children not yet born. "You plant for the kid who isn't born yet," Cass said. "That's the whole point." The light made architecture here is the same light made promise: it gets better, it is still getting better, and you — reader, pilgrim, you who have come all this way — are part of why.

Map — The Island of Manhattan

The procession traced upon the island, south to north as the light travels: the Dawn Threshold in Washington Heights (rose), the Gathering Arches in Harlem (coral), and the Meadow Pavilion at the edge of Central Park (gold). The dashed line marks the pilgrim's route — the path of a single long morning.



A BENEDICTION FOR THE WALKER

May the door you are most afraid of turn out to be the one that was always going to open for you.

May you find, when you finally cross the avenue you have been standing frightened across, that the answer waiting on the other side is the simple enormous yes you stopped letting yourself hope for: yes, it is for you; yes, it was always going to be for you; yes, there is room, there is so much more room than you were ever told.

May someone hold a door for you on a morning when you cannot hold it for yourself, and may you live long enough, and grow gold enough, to hold it one day for someone standing where you once stood, folded small, sure they are about to have something taken away.

May you be fed at a table where no one asks you to prove you deserve the meal. May you be loud in a room built to catch your loudness and throw it back to you doubled, so that you finally hear what your own joy sounds like out in the open air. May you set the heaviest thing you carry down into the keeping of people who do not flinch, in the safe deep middle of some good long night, and may you wake lighter by exactly its weight.

May you fall in love, if love is yours to want, with someone whose music answers yours across a warm and crowded room. And may the world, by the time you do, have made enough room that your love is not a private exception you must defend but a common song that everyone somehow knows the words to.

May you plant something you will not live to see in full glory — a tree, a garden, a procession, a kinder block, a braver child — for the ones not yet arrived, and may you do it gladly, the way the people who longed the first door into being did it gladly, knowing they would never walk through.

And when your own winter comes, as it comes for everyone, and the garden goes brown and the gold looks thin against the gray and you cannot believe the warm seasons were ever real — may you remember what the Meadow knows: that it is still there, all of it, under the brown, doing the deep dark necessary work, the roots going down precisely because the surface has gone quiet. May you hold on. The gold comes back. It has never once failed to come back. Yours will not fail either.

May you walk your one short warming life at your full height, taking up exactly as much room as you are, no more and no less, which is all any of us was ever asking to do.

And may you know, all the way down, in the place the old fear used to live, that you were never too late, and you were never too much, and there was always, always, always going to be room.

Go north. The light is moving. It is moving toward you even now.

— *Surjan*